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POPULAR WESTERN

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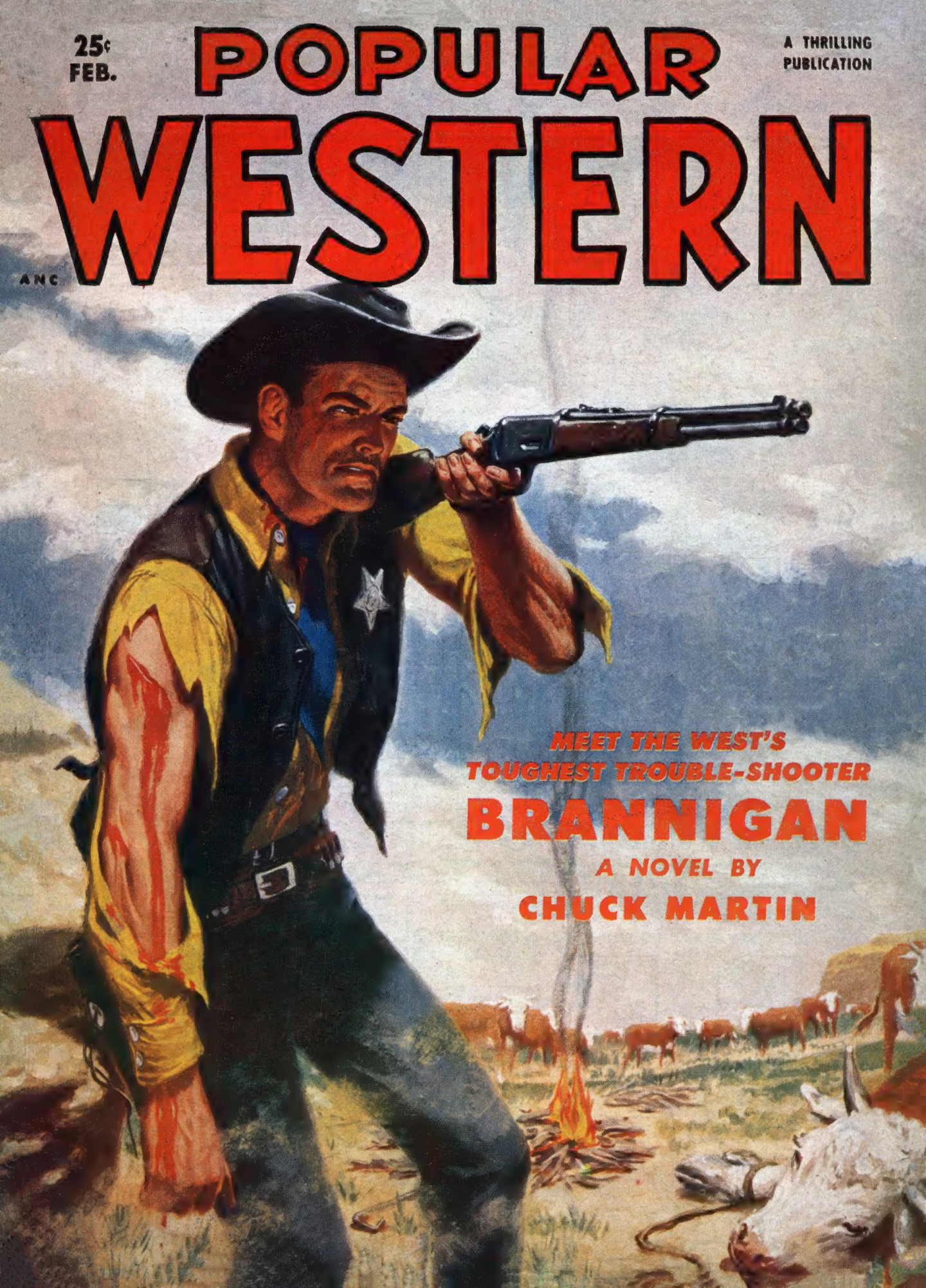

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A NOVEL BY

CHUCK MARTIN

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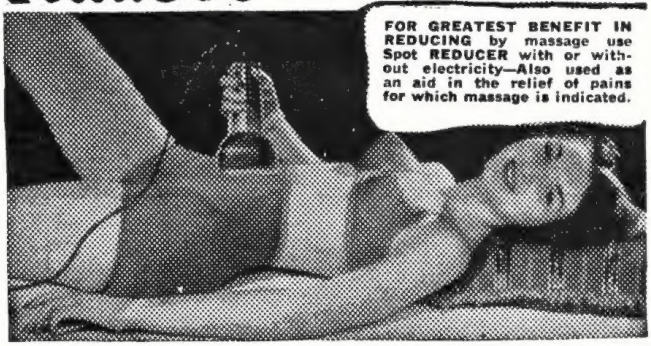

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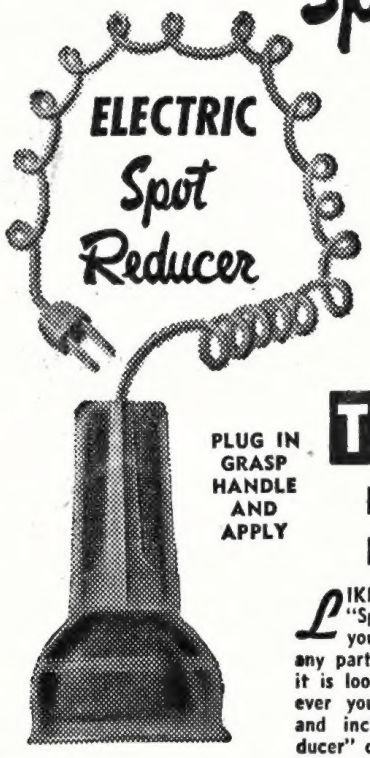

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Vol. XLII No. 1

FEBRUARY, 1952

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A BOOK-LENGTH WESTERN NOVEL

BRANNIGAN ..... CHUCK MARTIN 10

It was a three-cornered war in Terrapin Valley until a strange, fighting peacemaker busted the range wide open—with an unusual secret weapon!

SHORT STORIES

FOUNDLING OF MUSKRAT COVE..... L. D. GEUMLEK 95

The hate inside old George was ready to explode

LAST NOTCH FOR A LEAD THROWER... J. O. GOODWIN 103

He was the kind who made tough gunmen sing low

MESSAGE FOR A BUCKSKIN MAN... SCOTT CARLETON 111

Sometimes even a dead man can help a friend!

RIVER MAN..... GEOFFREY MAPES 121

A girl's pretty face spelled trouble for Matt

FEATURES

THE HOME CORRAL..... DOC LONG TRAIL 6

THE LIARS' CLUB..... A DEPARTMENT 9

AT CHRISTMAS (Verse)..... TEX MUMFORD 29

THOSE STRANGE BADMEN..... JACKSON COLE 53

UNLUCKY THIRTEEN (True Story)..... NORMAN RENARD 101

ARE YOU SUPERSTITIOUS?..... WESTERN LORE 102

TEXAN'S PRAYER..... KATHERINE BEVIS 110

SWEETHEARTS OF THE OUTLAW TRAIL... M. E. DAVID 120

DAVID X. MANNERS
EDITOR

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IT'S hard to believe, but topnotch foresters have decided that fires are a good thing, after all! They're deliberately burning off the land. Yet in the very areas where they're doing the burning, they still post warnings, telling us plain, ignorant citizens not to smoke or light campfires!

That isn't all. On the same day, recently, when U. S. Forest Service heads flew from Washington to fight a mountain fire in New Mexico—on that very same day, forestry officials gave their blessings to burning off 20,000 acres of cattle range in the Tehachapi Mountains of California. Yet they continued to preach fire prevention. Right there, in the Tehachapis, big signs said: KEEP CALIFORNIA GREEN—AND GOLDEN!

Now, who is loco? Maybe I am. I'm plenty befuddled, I'll admit. Why is fire dangerous and destructive in New Mexico, but desirable and beneficial in California? In order to find any sort of answer to that baffling question, let's weigh our "old fogy" notions of conservation against this newfangled scorched earth policy.

To begin with, a heap of cattlemen out West are in favor of fires and always have been. They even start them on the sly, quite often, claiming fire makes grass grow better.

Their peculiar line of reasoning is at least interesting. I've heard it for years, from Montana to Mexico. Here is a sample.

BENEFITS FROM FIRES

"All this uproar agin forest fires is uncalled for," an Oregon rancher told me. "You hear a lot of misleading talk about the damage to and loss of growing timber. But nobody speaks up openly to explain the over-all benefits. What we really need is more fires, and burning oftener."

"Isn't that a good deal like walloping yourself with a hammer to cure a headache?" I asked him.

"No! Indians set forest fires long before the white man came. Look at the charred trunks of those big old pines. Those fires were set in the late fall, after the first rains, at which time they cleaned out the undergrowth but seldom climbed to become a killing 'crown fire.'"

"Why did Injuns go to the trouble of starting those fires?"

"For several good reasons. One was that by destroying brush they made hunting easier. Also, wild berries thrive in old, old burns and berries were important food. Another thing, a ground fire produced a healthier, stronger forest, though I doubt if the Indians figured that out."

"Tell me how."

"That's easy. Ask any forester, and he'll admit that various wood beetles destroy more timber than fire or loggers. This loss is greatest in brushy forests that the government has 'protected' from fire. Underbrush is host for the various insect pests that blight timber. Beetle-killed trees are on the increase as a result of our 'conservation' methods, as any savvy old-timer will tell you."

He made it sound plenty convincing. It's true that a slow, smoldering ground fire doesn't do much damage to trees. Loggers burn their slashings in the fall, when moisture in the topsoil preserves the seedbed for future trees. They do that in Oregon and throughout the Northwest. But how about the drier Rockies, the basin ranges, and the arid intermountain country that don't get the early fall rains?

I asked a northern Arizona grazer about that. His comeback was pretty much the same as the Oregon stockman's say-so.

"Brush is plumb useless. Burn it, I say."

"But look, man! For years the Forest Service has told us that cover growth conserves water. It holds the rainfall and lets it soak into the ground."

"All right, suppose it does. It also robs the soil of that same moisture. Springs always pick up and flow heavier after a brush burn. Doesn't that prove it?"

What he said about springs is a well-known fact, which I've observed in many parts. Before I could comment on it, he let me have the other barrel.

"Here's another thing. In this country, most of our rain falls in short, light storms. The brush prevents a whole lot of that moisture from reaching the ground at all. Caught by leaves and twigs, it quickly evaporates in the dry air."

He was right again. I happened to know that experiments going on in the San Gabriel watershed, in southern California, show that to be the case. So I dodged that argument and went on to another, saying:

"Brush fires destroy seedling trees."

"Brush chokes out seedlings," he retorted. "Anyhow, the seedlings would be safe if there wasn't any brush to burn. Brush is a constant fire hazard—to young trees and everything else."

"So is dry grass."

"Sure. But once rid of brush, we can graze off the grass before the dry season comes."

"Then the next rain washes away the bare ground."

"Not if we had check-dams, small reservoirs, and contour furrowing. If half the money that goes into fire protection went into those things, run-off water would go underground, where we want it stored. Anyhow, a lot you hear about land erosion is wild talk. Sure, the valleys get silted in. They always have. It's nature's way of creating croplands. Crops love sediment."

"Then you think range fires are okay?"

"You're blamed tootin' I do!"

PUBLIC IMPROVEMENT

So there you are, hombres and hombresses. So now the experts are swerving around to the old-time cattlemen's ideas.

To get back to that 20,000-acre set fire in the Tehachapis, 'most everybody was for it. The State Division of Forestry, the University of California College of Agriculture, the Farm Advisory Service, and a rancher organization known as the San Joaquin Valley Range Improvement Committee—they all whooped it up.

It's the first big, on-purpose range-burning stunt, although experimental burns have been made in the Sierras in the past two-three years, and more are planned. More grass, more cattle, that's the idea.

As matters stand now, a fire-swept landscape is a public improvement—if approved by the soil scientists. But if any of us private citizens start that fire, accidentally or otherwise, off to jail we go.

So be careful with matches and smokes, folks, just like the big yellow signs tell us. If we up and burn off the country there won't be anything left for the official firebugs to burn! • • •

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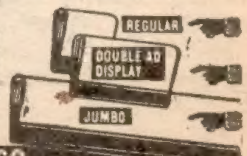

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The Trotting Snake

UP IN the Colorado Rockies, my friend Windy Bill caught one of the biggest snakes I ever saw. It wasn't much for length, only about two feet, but what made it unusual—it was thicker than a good-sized horse. Windy called him Trotter.

Windy and Trotter were soon traveling with a circus. They gave the snake free run of a car up near the engine, and toward the rear Windy had a Pullman for himself. Well, Trotter got kind of lonely for his boss, and thinking to head back toward him he gnawed open the door that runs out onto the car platform. Just as he got there, the coupling pin gave way, and what do you think—that Trotter snake just grabbed one of them couplers in his teeth and the other with his tail and darned if he didn't hold that train together going up a steep mountain grade and kept it from rolling backward and killing everybody including Windy!

The only thing that went wrong was that journey stretched that Trotter snake thirty-one feet, and after that darned if they didn't have to advertise him as a boa-constrictor!

—E. A. Brininstool

Why Injun No Get Cold

A WHITE man was crossing the Great Plains during a blizzard, using an Indian as a guide. The temperature was well below freezing and the white man was wearing earmuffs and a fur coat, and under his coat he had on three sweaters, four wool shirts and a suit of long red flannels. But still he was shivering with the cold.

The placid red man was wearing only a thin cotton breech-clout. But he didn't seem to mind the cold at all.

Finally, the white man decided he had to know why the Indian wasn't cold.

"How come," he inquired, "that I'm cold when I'm wearing a suit of long underwear, four wool shirts, three sweaters and a fur coat, not to mention seven pair of socks and a pair of ear-muffs—and you, just wearing that breech-clout, don't mind the cold at all?"

The Indian paused a moment in inscrutable thought. Then he grunted.

"Your face cold?" he asked.

"No," the white man admitted. "My face isn't cold."

"You wear nothing on face, yet face not cold," said the red man. "Injun—me all face."

—Albert E. Roscoe

Texas Fish

AN OLD Texan in California was irked at all the tall tales of West Coast fish. So finally he said, "Well, we don't have any fish in Texas worth bragging about." Then, holding his hands about twelve inches apart, he said, "I never saw any bigger than that." He stopped briefly, surveyed the gathering blandly, and concluded, "Of course you have to remember that we always measure our fish between the eyes."

—Mrs. Glenn Mosier

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To the bawling of cattle, the bleating of sheep, and the complaints of nesters, a new sound was added in Terrapin Valley—gun thunder!

Brannigan swiveled in the saddle and chopped a shot at Crag Trenton

A NOVEL BY
CHUCK MARTIN

BRANNIGAN

CHAPTER I

Home Folks

THE TALL RIDER rode deep in the saddle as his stout Morgan horse followed the meandering course of Terrapin Creek which divided Terrapin Valley. He was tanned to a deep bronze by sun and wind, and his dark blue eyes had that penetrating expression of a man long accustomed to gazing into far distances. A .30 gun rode in the scabbard under his left saddle fender, and a long-barreled .45 sixgun was on his right thigh.

His long straight nose tilted with dislike as the strong odor of oily wool came down the gentle breeze, but three miles further on he nodded his approval at the cattle grazing along the north bank of the brawling stream. He read the peculiar brand—something like a figure 8 with a heavy perpendicular line running through the middle—to himself.

"The Two B, back-to-back. Must be the Brodie outfit."

Two riders emerged from a bosque of mahogany scrub, angling their mustangs to intercept the tall rider.

"Howdy, stranger," the younger of the pair called. "You looking for a riding job?"

The tall horseman studied the cattleman, then shook his head slowly.

"Not yet," he answered in a deep, crisp voice. "Just looking around."

"My name is Brodie," the young cowboy said with a smile. "Junior Brodie, when the old man is about. This here is Jud Cummings, our *segundo*."

"I'm Brannigan," the tall stranger acknowledged, and added, "I passed sheep a while back."

A fleeting scowl passed quickly over young Brodie's face. "The Jenkinses walk sheep over that way," he said bluntly. "They keep 'em clean and they keep 'em away from the Two B range." He returned to his original subject. "We could use a good man; the pay is fifty a month and shells."

"There must be a war on," Brannigan said quietly. "Thanks, but I'm a man of peace. I'll be riding along."

He touched the Morgan with a blunted spur and was gone before Junior Brodie could frame an answer. Brodie stared after the straight powerful back.

"What you make of that gun-hawk, Jud?" he asked Cummings.

"He has the markings of a gun-swift," Jud Cummings answered. "Off-hand, I'd say I'd rather have that feller Brannigan as a friend than an enemy."

"He's cow-folks, right enough," young Brodie said thoughtfully, "but he's something more. Has the look of an hombre who has done other kinds of hard work."

"Like maybe sodbusting?" Cummings made a guess.

"Whatever it was, it wasn't walking sheep," Brodie said gruffly. What would that leave here in Terrapin Valley?"

"Yeah," Cummings agreed. "Unless he just wants to see what's on the other side of the hill, he's interested in that settlement of nesters."

AHEAD of them, Brannigan reined his horse closer to the creek. Ruffled water told his experienced eyes of a ford, and he urged his mount across the shallows.

Now he noticed that the valley was

made up of high places and low. His eyes came to rest on strands of wire which told him that fence had been built to keep animals out, not just to fence stock in. The posts were sturdy and set deep, the barbed wire strung tightly.

In the center of what he knew to be a homestead, Brannigan saw a large, solidly built house and outbuildings. Ingenuity and skill had built that house; some of it was packed earth, other portions of stone and stout timbers.

A big man was working in a field, a man as solid as the house. He was driving four huge Percheron horses hitched to a gang-plow which threw up three deep furrows of rich black loam. Another four-horse hitch was dragging a spring-tooth harrow across the furrows.

Brannigan rode through a big open gate and on to meet the sodbuster. The plowman, a homesteader in this Oklahoma Territory, John Fairtree saw the tall stranger waiting at the end of the furrows and studied him closely.

"About five-feet-ten, a hundred and seventy pounds, on the lean side, thirty years old maybe," he sized up Brannigan. "Cowboy from hoofs to horns, but he's done some farming, and plenty of wood-chopping. Good all-around man, and no stranger to fire-arms!"

Brannigan was making a silent appraisal of his own.

"Tough old feller," he told himself. "Fifty years old or thereabouts, six feet even, two hundred pounds of hard bone and tough muscle. He could still work a good man under the wagon, and never get up a sweat."

The four Percherons harnessed abreast stopped at furrow's end, sniffed inquiringly at the deep-chested mountain horse, and blew lustily through deep flaring nostrils.

"Howdy, stranger," John Fairtree greeted. "Light down and rest your saddle a spell. Ma is having prairie chicken for dinner, with dumplings and fixings. My name is John Fairtree, and yonder with the harrow is my son Clinton."

"Howdy. My name is Brannigan. Are you hiring any hands today?"

John Fairtree showed his surprise. "You mean working the land?" he asked dubiously. "Busting the sod, and such like?"

"That earth smells good," Brannigan answered with a half-smile. "I'd like to rest a spell from drifting, and give my muscles a chance."

"I can't pay fighting wages," Fairtree said simply. "Best I can do is forty a month and food, but you'll never eat better grub."

"You've hired a man," Brannigan said quietly. "And I always fight for the iron that pays me my wages."

"You're mostly a cow feller," Fairtree said bluntly. "We've only got fifty-odd head of cattle under our Circle F brand, but the Two B outfit is paying fifty a month and shells for good hands."

"I met young Brodie," Brannigan said drily. "What started the war?"

John Fairtree raised his bushy eyebrows. "The stockmen don't want the range fenced. We homesteaders aim to raise crops, and we aim to protect them."

"You're a 'Sooner,' then," Brannigan guessed. "You staked out your claims before the land rush."

"How'd you know?"

Brannigan jerked his head toward the buildings. "You couldn't have built this up in two years," he answered logically. "What are you holding?"

"Two sections between my two boys and me," Fairtree answered without hesitation. "We each homesteaded a quarter section, and bought out some fellers who got tired—or afraid. . . . Make you used to my youngest boy, Clinton. Clint, this is Brannigan, our new hand."

Brannigan dismounted and offered his hand.

Clint Fairtree, about twenty-two, was tall and slender. He moved with the lithe grace of a panther, and suggested the same hidden strength. He winced a bit as

Brannigan vised down on his big right hand.

"He'll do, Pa," he told his father. "He's got you and George beat for grinding muscle!"

BRANNIGAN smiled his tight-lipped smile. John Fairtree also smiled, but it expressed doubt.

"We'll see," he murmured. "Now we eat."

He turned abruptly and unfastened the stout traces from the heavy hames. Clint

BRANNIGAN

performed a similar service for his four huge draft horses, jumped to the back of a Percheron which would weigh close to a ton, and called to Brannigan:

"Let's get up to the barn. What did you say your first name was, Brannigan?"

"I didn't," the new hand answered. "Just call me Brannigan."

"You come from up north?" asked Clint.

"Yeah," Brannigan answered. "From up north."

Clint Fairtree stared, then clucked to his horses. John Fairtree grinned and started for the huge barn on foot. Then he indicated a box stall, told Brannigan to turn his Morgan in for grain.

Brannigan stripped his gear, hanging his hand-made saddle on a peg, with the skirts turned to catch the air.

A separate building was a granary, filled to overflowing with oats and barley. Great ricks of hay were stacked near a big fenced corral. A big circular tank was overflowing with clear cold water.

"Feed lot," Brannigan said to John Fairtree. "You'll buy stockers and feeders, and fatten 'em for the Kay-See market."

"If we can get them to Kansas City," Fairtree agreed, "that's the most profitable way to sell our grain."

Brannigan nodded. John Fairtree would do well in this raw new land.

"A man could get his roots in the soil here," he said quietly. "The days of free range are passing."

Clint Fairtree looked up quickly from slipping the heavy bridles from the heads of his horses.

"Tell that to Buff Brodie," he said stiffly. "Or to Jim Jenkins and his brother Jasper who run sheep!"

"On the other side of the creek," John Fairtree added.

"Two homesteaders have been killed," Clint said, jaw outthrust. "But two sheepers paid up, and one cowhand!"

"What about the law?" Brannigan asked.

"There ain't any," John Fairtree murmured. "Except a United States Marshal and one deputy. They get down thisaway about every six months."

He led the way to the big house across the yard to where on a bench were three granite basins.

"Splash good," he told Brannigan. "I'll tell Ma to set out an extra place."

Brannigan washed his face and hands, reveling in the cold water. He dried his face on a huck towel, combed his light

brown hair, and drew in a deep breath. His chest swelled against the buttons of his shirt, and the muscles rippled along his back and shoulders as he slowly stretched his arms above his head.

"You're strong," Clint said. "But Dad will work you into the dirt. He's the strongest man in these parts, maybe except George."

"George?" Brannigan repeated.

"He's my older brother. He's twenty-six, married, and has a boy four years old. Weighs two-twenty, and he ain't never been whipped nor rassled down!"

"Good man," Brannigan answered lightly. "How many homesteaders here in the valley?"

"Nine families all told," Clint said. "Olaf Pederson is the biggest man—he's six-feet-five. He came from Minnesota. We headed out here from Iowa."

"Are you fellers organized?" Brannigan asked.

"We help each other," Clint answered proudly.

Brannigan turned quickly when a pleasant feminine voice called:

"Come and get it!"

Clint led the way into a large kitchen. He gave his mother a bear hug.

"Ma," he said, "make you used to Brannigan, our new hand. He don't have any first handle!"

Brannigan bowed and murmured politely: "Happy to know you, Mrs. Fairtree."

"I hope you have a good appetite," Ma Fairtree said, with a smile. "Sit there next to Clint, and don't expect him to pass anything. That young-un is just a healthy skin wrapped around an appetite."

"Now, Ma, you know I just love your cooking," Clint defended himself. "I never et after a better cook in all my born days!"

"Go on with you," Ma Fairtree chided. "Did you come far, Mr. Brannigan?"

"A right good piece," Brannigan said quietly. "But I love this country down here in the Nations."

"It will be a state some day," Ma Fairtree said hopefully. "There's some talk of calling it 'Oklahoma', but that may take quite a while."

"Maybe not so long," John Fairtree said. "Once the settlers start coming in good."

MA FAIRTREE passed Brannigan a heaping plate. There were great slabs of salt-rising bread and freshly-churned butter, and a big dish of new potatoes. The prairie chicken was smothered in a rich gravy. Brannigan ate with relish.

Clint nudged him with an elbow.

"Save room for some green-apple pie," he whispered. "Feller, you'll think you are in heaven with the bars let down."

Brannigan nodded and went on with his methodical eating. Even in that there was a suggestion of strength and power, and a slowness which masked a deceptive speed of hand and foot.

"Don't let Pa get you into a work duel," Ma Fairtree warned him. "He doesn't know his own strength, like our older boy, George."

Brannigan merely nodded. Work was something which was always with a man, but home-cooking like Ma Fairtree's was something extra special, and deserving of the fullest concentration.

"One work duel I wouldn't miss for a new red wagon," Clint said with a knowing smile. "Some of those old tree-roots we got to get out are a million years old, and tougher than Tophet. And those big rocks Pa keeps saying he'll sledge apart are older than that."

Brannigan looked at Clint, glanced at John Fairtree's face, and smiled a little when Ma winked at him.

"Single, or double-bitted ax?" he asked quietly.

"Double," Fairtree Senior said. "That way, a man has two strings to his bow."

Ma served generous wedges of green-apple pie with a slice of rat-trap cheese on top. Brannigan thanked her with deep sincerity.

"Does a body good to have someone with appreciation come along," she said, pleased. "Pa and Clint take good grub for granted."

"Shucks, Ma, we ain't never knowed any other kind since I married you," John Fairtree said. "Clint, you mend your manners to your ma, or I'll wear out a whiffle-tree on your backside!"

Clint pushed back his chair, went behind his mother and cuddled his bronzed cheek against her face.

"'At's how much I love you, Ma," he whispered.

Brannigan smiled, and his face seemed to belong to a different man.

"Home folks," he said softly. "I'm going to like it here."

"That's what you think now," Clint warned. "Wait till suppertime, after Pa has worked you over from here to who laid the chunk."

"Let's get at it," Brannigan answered lightly. "I've been in the saddle quite a spell, and my muscles are aching for exercise."

CHAPTER II

Man to Man

JOHN FAIRTREE led the way to the tool shed. He picked up two double-bitted axes and a pair of twelve-pound sledge-hammers. He handed one of each to Brannigan.

Brannigan knelt beside his bedroll. He brought out a pair of stout field boots, and changed from his high-heeled cowboy boots. Then he followed John Fairtree into the large field.

The spot to which Fairtree led was covered with huge boulders, and the gnarled roots of aged trees.

"We'll take out the ringers first," Fairtree said stolidly. "Then we can get at those old granddaddy stumps in the middle. Can you swing an ax, Brannigan?"

"Some," Brannigan answered.

"Then fly at it," Fairtree suggested.

Brannigan picked out a root-stump, looked it over, and straddled a worn root. He spat on his hands, gripped the ax handle, and whirled it over his head. The blade flashed in the afternoon sun, then bit deep into the toughened root. Brannigan loosened it with a clever twist, whirled the ax again, and bit out a large wedge with his second stroke.

"I knew it!" John Fairtree said positively. "You've been a lumberjack. Well, let's start making firewood agin winter."

He picked up his own ax and sank it in another stump, grunting at each cleaving stroke. They worked in silence for a half-hour, thinning out the smaller stumps which ringed the outer rim of the spot.

Brannigan jumped down into a hole, cut the main tap root with a slashing stroke, and fitted his left shoulder to the gnarled bole. He grunted, and heaved the stump out onto the plowed ground.

Both men were sweating now, and measuring each other. There was a curious expression of surprise on the weathered features of John Fairtree. He had expected Brannigan to puff and gasp after a few minutes, but the new hand was enjoying himself.

Brannigan straddled a bigger root and cut the opening wedge with two sure strokes. He left the ax in the cut, stripped off his shirt, and stretched his long arms over his head. Fairtree whistled softly as he stared at the long, powerful muscles in Brannigan's broad back, and the smooth flowing strength which seemed to ripple from hips to shoulders.

Brannigan picked up his ax and started to work. Fairtree watched the corded muscles bunch, then relax, and flow back from another devastating stroke.

Brannigan's five-feet-ten would make him a comparatively small man among the giants of the settlement, and his one hundred and seventy pounds would be fifty less than the bulk of George Fairtree, John's oldest son. But Fairtree knew that here was a man who could hold his own longer than most.

In an hour Brannigan had severed all the feeder roots of the old stump. He

jumped down in the hole and cut the straight-down taproot with several strokes, and called to Fairtree:

"The two of us can hump this one out and over!"

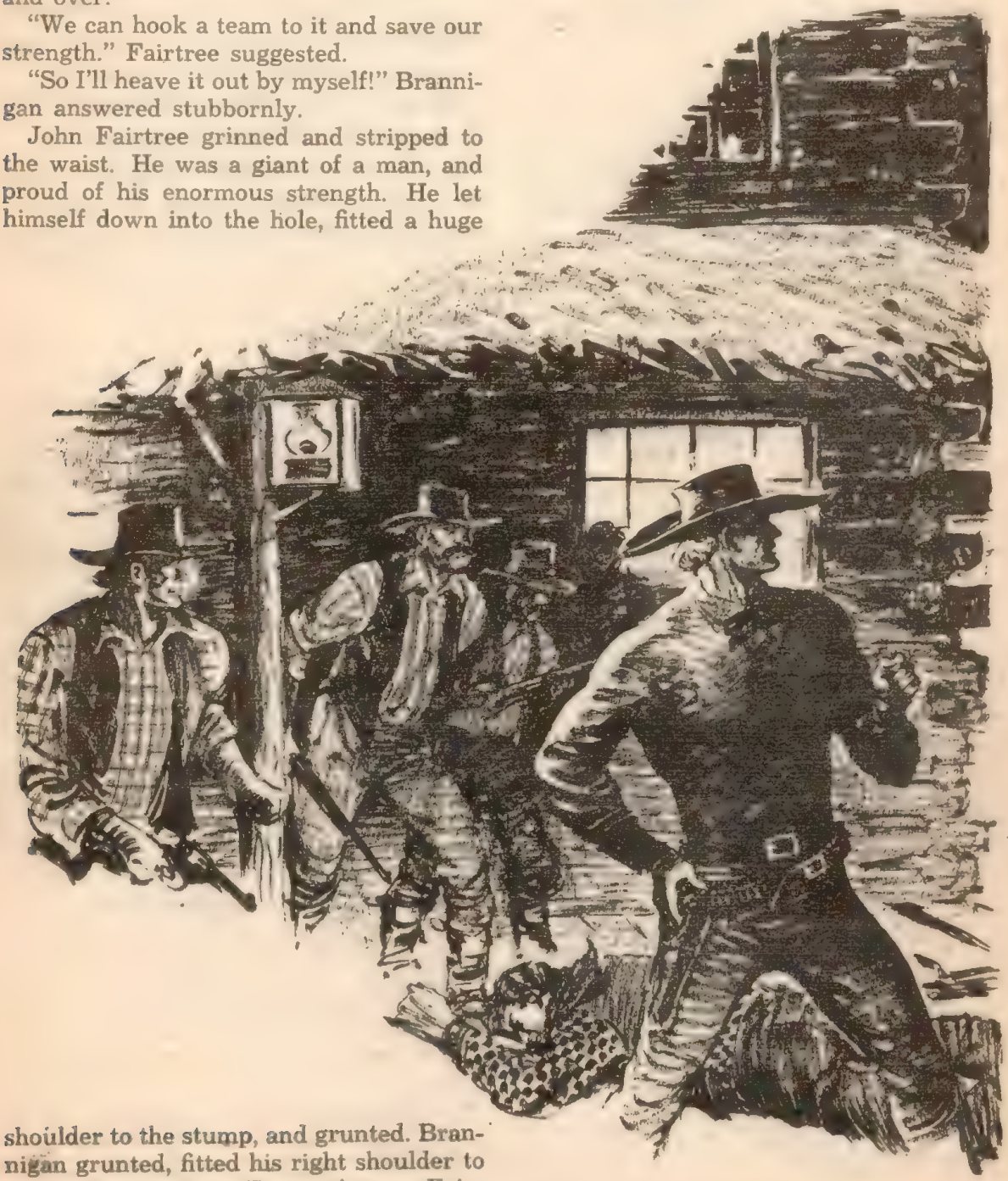
"We can hook a team to it and save our strength." Fairtree suggested.

"So I'll heave it out by myself!" Brannigan answered stubbornly.

John Fairtree grinned and stripped to the waist. He was a giant of a man, and proud of his enormous strength. He let himself down into the hole, fitted a huge shoulder to the stump, and grunted. Brannigan grunted, fitted his right shoulder to the bole, staring into Fairtree's eyes. Fairtree nodded.

Both men took up the slack in their muscles. Both took long deep breaths, straightened their legs; then muscles bulged and cracked as the old stump rose slowly on the far rim of the pit.

"Hold it so, until I get back and under," Brannigan said shortly. He went lower into the hole, dug with both flat heels, and found a new purchase. "Get yourself another holt!" he called.



John Fairtree did not argue. Here was a man who knew what he was doing. That aged stump would weigh a ton, but Bran-

nigan gave the go-ahead with a short nod of his head.

Four legs straightened out to tilt the stump an inch. Muscles bunched in two powerful backs, and sweat poured down their faces. The stump pushed up and hung on the rim of the pit.

John Fairtree knew that his draft horses would have snaked the stump out without effort. But this was a challenge, a test between two men. Brannigan stared into Fairtree's eyes and said:

"Now!"

The stump moved up another inch and hung stubbornly on the lip of the cut. It seemed to John Fairtree that he had never seen such a deep blue as in the eyes of Brannigan. Then a cold fire began to stir in those inscrutable blue depths.

Brannigan swelled his chest, stiffened his neck, and placed his left hand under his right shoulder. Then he hunched up just a trifle, and the hanging stump cleared the hole and went tumbling out on the plowed ground.

"That's that," Brannigan said, with quiet satisfaction. "Let's start another one."

John Fairtree shook his head. "I've got plowing to do," he said, as he gasped for breath. "But that ain't really honest.

"Stop it, Father!" a girl's voice screamed. "Don't shoot, Mr. Brannigan!"

Pound for pound you're a better man than I am, Brannigan. They must raise 'em tough where you were foaled."

Brannigan pulled on his shirt, strapped on his gun-belt.

"Riders!" he said.

Fairtree climbed out of the hole, pulled on his shirt, and stared at the three oncoming riders.

"That's old Buff Brodie and Junior," he said quietly. "He owns the big Two B outfit. That hulking son with them is Monk Saunders. He can whip any two big men in Terrapin Valley."

Brannigan had seen Junior Brodie, and old Buff was an older edition of his strapping son. He was a lean six-footer with gray cowhorn mustaches framing a hard mouth, and about fifty. The old cattleman wore his Colt .45 six-shooter tied-down.

Buff Brodie rode with arrogance and headed straight for John Fairtree.

"I don't like fences like I've told you, Fairtree," he announced harshly. "This ain't farmland, as you know, but I'm willing to be fair. I'll give you three dollars an acre for your holdings, or I'll tear down you fences. . . . Well?"

Fairtree shook his big head slowly. "My land ain't for sale, Brodie," he said emphatically. "Some I bought—paid five dollars an acre for it. When I get ready to sell, I'll name my price."

"Just a bunch of shovel-hands," "Monk" Saunders said sneeringly, and stared at Brannigan. "You want to make something out of it?"

Brannigan slowly shook his head. "Nuh-uh," he answered. "I'm just working here."

"Yellow, eh?" Saunders taunted. "The first time I catch you in town you want to start running!"

Brannigan sighed as he laid the heavy sledge aside. "Why wait that long?" he asked crisply. "Make your pass—*now!*"

His right hand twitched down and came up filled with burnished gun-metal. Monk Saunders guffawed and stretched his thick arms lazily over his head.

"Afraid of a skull-and-knuckle ruckus, eh?" he taunted.

"Climb down," Brannigan said quietly. "Unbuckle your belt, and hang it on your saddle-horn. You other two trespassers do likewise just to save bloodshed!"

For a moment it seemed as though Buff Brodie would match his draw against Brannigan's drop. Then he unbuckled his gun-belt. Junior followed his father's example as Monk Saunders climbed heavily from his saddle. He hung his gun-belt on his saddle, scuffed his big boots like a rooster kicking a clod apart in the barnyard, and leered at Brannigan.

"I ain't never had enough fight, and I ain't ever been whupped!" he said thickly.

Brannigan handed his cocked pistol to John Fairtree.

"Just to keep them Two B fellers honest," he commented.

"Take a free swing," Saunders invited, "so I can claim self-defense!"

Brannigan's open right hand shot out to slap Monk Saunders smartly across the eyes. Then he stepped back with both hands hanging at his sides.

"That makes it legal," he told Saunders. "Any holts barred?"

"I'll kill you for that!" Saunders bellowed. "I'll stomp your innards in the plowed ground!"

HE MADE a rush at Brannigan, who eluded him with effortless ease. As Saunders rushed past, Brannigan planted his right boot in the seat of the big man's gray pants. Saunders went to hands and knees, rolled with both arms protecting his face, and lurched to his feet.

"Take him, Monk!" Buff Brodie said. "Tear off one of his legs and beat his brains out with it!"

Saunders shuffled in like a great shaggy bear. Brannigan moved around him, jabbing with his lightning-left fist. Then he moved in to meet the giant, and Saunders made a grab with both powerful arms.

John Fairtree gasped as Brannigan was caught. He gasped again when Brannigan's left knee came up to catch Saunders, and his right fist shot up to catch the man under the chin.

Saunders' head jerked back, his claw-

ing hand at both swelling eyes. Then Brannigan threw himself backward as his right boot shot out in the dreaded *sabote* kick of the French-Canadian woodsmen.

Saunders was hurled to the ground as if he had been struck by a twister. Brannigan rolled and made one long-legged leap. His right fist blasted against Saunders' huge nose as the bully straightened up, and Saunders went down again with a stream of crimson spouting from his broken nose.

Saunders screamed with insane fury. Brannigan was right after him, and Saunders offered his jaw for a free target. Brannigan fell into the trap, blasted a vicious right at the prognathous jaw, and then Saunders had Brannigan's right wrist.

Brannigan went with the pull, turning like a cat just before he crashed into Saunders' huge chest. Now Brannigan's left hand flashed down and under the big man's right arm as Brannigan threw himself forward and down. There was a sickening snap just before Saunders hurtled through the air over the head of his much smaller antagonist. Instead of releasing his hold, Brannigan tightened his grip, twisting.

Monk Saunders screamed as he came to his knees. Brannigan cupped his left palm under Saunders' chin to help the big Two B cowboy to his feet, then stepped in behind a straight right with all his strength and weight behind the blow to the chin.

Saunders swayed forward. His eyes were glazed, and his knees unhinged as he crashed to the plowed ground on his battered face.

Brannigan picked up his gun-belt. He took his six-shooter from Fairtree, seated it in his holster, and faced the Brodies.

"Was it a fair shake?" he asked quietly.

"You call that fair fighting?" Buff Brodie demanded.

"He said no holts barred," Brannigan reminded. "I could have killed him. You want to take it up where Monk left off?"

"Brave talk after you dehorned both me and Junior," the older Brodie sneered.

"Get dressed," Brannigan invited. "And we'll play a game of draw if you think you have openers. I'll play what I catch on the draw, and I've made my ante."

"Let's ride, Junior," old "Buff" Brodie said quietly. "He wins this go-around!"

"Just a minute," Brannigan interrupted, as both men swung their horses around. "You brought Monk with you. Take him back."

He walked over to the unconscious Saunders, caught a crotch-and-shoulder hold on the big cowhand, lifted him, and laid him face-down across his worn saddle.

"Glad I met you gents," he said, and handed the bridle reins to Junior Brodie. "My boss says his fences stay up. *Adios*!"

When the Brodies had departed with Monk Saunders and a vastly wounded pride, John Fairtree went to the barns to get his teams, leaving Brannigan with an appetite for more hard, sweating toil.

In the very center of the island of rocks and roots, a huge boulder jutted up like one king tree in a forest of giants. Brannigan climbed to the top with the twelve-pound sledge in his hands. He studied the grain of the granite, spaced his work boots, and struck a tremendous blow with his sledge. The decomposed granite shattered under the impact, and the fourth blow opened a wide crack.

Brannigan climbed down to the ploughed ground and picked up a pair of heavy steel wedges. After climbing back to the sentinel rock, he inserted a wedge in the crack, and tapped it lightly in place. Then he began a ringing tattoo on the stubborn granite, and the smoldering fire in his dark eyes matched the sparks that flew from the chilled-steel wedge. He worked until the sweat ran down his muscular frame in torrents.

MA FAIRTREE stepped out of the kitchen and stared at the wide-shouldered man silhouetted against the northern skyline.

"He's working off a mad," she murmured. "A mad he carried here with him from wherever he came from."

Brannigan had again removed his shirt,

but his shell-studded belt rode on his lean hips, and the black-butted six-shooter rode in his hand-molded holster.

The sun slanted down behind the distant Arbuckle Mountains, and the long shadows of twilight began to creep across the valley. Brannigan kept up his furious attack on the stubborn granite, but laid his sledge aside when John Fairtree climbed wearily to the high rock.

"You feel better now?" he asked.

Brannigan smiled grimly. "Yeah, better," he admitted. "Dreams are born in raw country, John. Dreams, that only hard work can make come true."

"We could plow around this island," Fairtree said. "There's land enough."

"Land enough," Brannigan agreed. "But not near enough water!"

"So the answer is dry farming," Fairtree said gruffly. "That means grain crops."

"This country has years of drought," Brannigan explained. "It might get worse. If there was a reservoir up here, you could water half your land in the driest years."

"But we couldn't build it," Fairtree declared emphatically.

Brannigan shrugged as he jerked his head at the rock he had battered with the sledge. "You forget black powder, and those teams of big horses. I've done some quarrying, and I can handle powder.

CHAPTER III

Where There's a Will, There's a Well

FAIRTREE studied his new hand with added respect. Brannigan had labored mightily for six hours, but instead of being fatigued his eyes glowed as he studied the conformation of the tableland.

"It will take time," he said shortly, "and will cost some money, but we can drill a well right under this mountain of a rock when we get it blasted out!"

"There ain't a deep well in the Territory," Fairtree said stubbornly.

"So we can build the first one," Brannigan countered. "I saw an old well rig not two days ride from here. It could be bought for a song, and we could sing the song ourselves."

"I'll talk it over with Ma and Clint," Fairtree agreed. "Now let's get back for supper. Ma baked a big ham with sweet potatoes, and you've done enough work for one day."

Brannigan gathered up his tools and followed Fairtree. Darkness was closing in when the two men washed at the bench behind the kitchen. Ma Fairtree smiled at Brannigan as he entered and took a chair beside Clint.

"Did you work off your mad?" she asked him quietly.

Brannigan, startled, stared at Ma, then nodded.

"I did," he answered simply. "That ham smells elegant."

"What was you mad about?" Clint asked curiously.

Brannigan turned and studied the boy's face, then said:

"Might does not make right. Saunders was just the beginning, and you Sooners better be prepared!"

With his appetite whetted by the strenuous work of the long afternoon, Brannigan filled and emptied his plate three times, while Ma Fairtree beamed. Clint finally acknowledged defeat.

"I reckon maybe I ain't living right," he told Brannigan.

"When you get to helping with the new reservoir," Brannigan answered with a slow smile, "we'll eat Ma out of house and home."

"What new reservoir?" Clint asked. "I haven't seen any."

"You will," John Fairtree said, and his eyes sparkled. "Tomorrow you and Brannigan will take one of the big wagons and make a little trip, be gone maybe four days. Brannigan will have time to tell you all about it."

He lighted up an old pipe, and leaned back in his big chair to let the weariness drain from his healthy body. When Brannigan's own smoke was finished, he said he'd turn in to be ready for an early start in the morning.

Ma Fairtree led him to a rear room containing two beds. "You'll share this room with Clint," she said. "I'm mighty glad you came, and more glad that you are going to stay."

"Thank you, ma'am," Brannigan said, with one of his rare smiles. "That was a wonderful supper. Clint will appreciate your cooking even more by the time we get back. After he eats my cooking for three-four days. Goodnight, Ma Fairtree."

He sat down on the comfortable bed, removed his heavy work boots, stripped down to his underwear, and crawled between the blankets. He was asleep almost instantly.

Daybreak was just lighting the distant mountains when Brannigan shook Clint's shoulder. Clint buried his tousled head under the covers. Brannigan flipped the blankets back, pulled the boy to a sitting position, and spoke sternly.

"Rise and shine, partner. We've got to harness the teams!"

"Middle of the night," Clint moaned, then noticed that Brannigan was fully dressed. "What's all the rush?"

"Work to do," Brannigan said. "I've fed the horses, and Ma has breakfast nearly ready. I want to be gone before the stockmen start riding, so stomp into your boots!"

Clint stretched sleepily, but crawled out of his comfortable bed.

In the kitchen, Ma Fairtree frowned when Clint strapped a gun-belt about his lean hips, but Brannigan smiled and nodded in approval.

"Just insurance," he said lightly. "Clint is man-size now, and will be doing a man's work."

They sat down to a big breakfast, and had finished before the sun was up. John Fairtree had sacked grain for the horses, had stowed it under the seat of the big freighter wagon. He gave Clint a list of supplies to pick up in the little town of Bass, and the money with which to pay for them.

CLINT fastened his two teams to the hames and heavy wagon-tongue. Brannigan rode out from the barn on his stocky Morgan, shook hands with John Fairtree, touched the brim of his black Stetson to Ma, and led the way from the big yard.

"We'll be back by sundown Sunday," he called. "And we'll be mighty hungry."

Brannigan kept to his saddle until they had left Terrapin Creek, then he tied his horse to the tail-gate and climbed to the seat beside Clint. Young Fairtree was handling his teams like a veteran skinner, holding them to a fast, mile-eating walk.

"How far to this well rig?" he asked Brannigan.

"I'd say about forty miles, or a bit more," Brannigan answered. "We'll pick up the supplies first, and we won't attract attention coming back."

Ma Fairtree had packed enough food for the first day, and the two men ate beside a flowing spring where the horses could be watered and fed. They swung alongside a wagon platform at the little town of Bass just before sundown, and Clint bought his supplies which Brannigan loaded under the high front seat of the wagon.

That night they made camp on the prairie, with the horses staked out to graze. Brannigan built a small fire of greasewood and sage roots, and the two men sat close to the blaze as they smoked quirlies. Then Brannigan rolled his blankets under the wagon, telling Clint they would hit the road again at daybreak.

Clint Fairtree sat near the fire for another hour, trying to digest what little he had learned about his companion. Brannigan had talked about working with cows, about logging and hard-rock mining. He had given the impression that he had drifted through most of the West from Canada to the Mexican border. He was an enigma to Clint who finally kicked

out the fire and rolled his own bed under the wagon. . . .

Brannigan was cooking breakfast when Clint awoke. The horses were eating their grain from heavy nose-bags, and a blackened coffee-pot swung from a green twig tripod. Brannigan was cooking bacon and warming beans in a cast iron skillet, as Clint crawled out of the blankets. Brannigan called: "Come and get it before I throw it to the other hogs!"

"Tastes good," Clint remarked as he ate, "but it lacks for variety. I'll be glad to get back to Ma's cooking."

"You said plenty," Brannigan said drily. "We ought to reach that rigging early in the afternoon."

"The McCullough place?" Clint asked and Brannigan looked at him sharply.

"How did you know?" he asked.

"He's got the only well rig I know of in these parts," Clint answered. "Most of the homesteaders depend on springs or creek water."

Brannigan cleaned the tin dishes while Clint spanned in his two teams. They pulled into an unkempt yard shortly after noon. A tired-looking woman called to them to light down, and a big, rough-looking man added his own invitation.

"I'm Ben McCullough," he told Brannigan.

"Howdy, McCullough. My name is Brannigan."

The two men shook hands, then helped Clint unspan his teams. All three walked to the sod-and-stone house where Mrs. McCullough said:

"Sit and have some grits and side-meat!"

"Drat this country," McCullough said, when the meal was almost finished. "I'd like to sell out for enough to get me and Ma back to Indiana."

"You ain't been on your claim but a year," Clint reminded. "Takes longer than that to prove up, or buy out,"

"I'd leave this shanty to the pack rats, if I could go back," McCullough growled. "All I got to sell is my well rig and engine, and I'd take four hundred dollars cash for the whole outfit!"

"Would you help load it for that price, cash in hand?" Brannigan asked.

"You thinking of going into the business?" McCullough asked.

"I was giving it some thought," Brannigan admitted.

"I'll help you load it, and give you three hundred feet of three-inch pipe," McCullough offered eagerly. "I wasn't cut out to bust the sod, and Ma's been failing here on the prairie."

"Make out a bill of sale," Brannigan said quietly. "I'll buy your outfit on speculation."

McCULLOUGH stared. He touched his wife's hand and whispered:

"Did you hear that, honey? We can go back to Indiana."

"God bless you, Mr. Brannigan!" Mrs. McCullough whispered, and burst into tears. "We had two fine boys like Clinton," she sobbed. "Both were killed by sheepmen while we were drilling a well!"

Brannigan's jaw tightened. He walked into the front room, removed a money belt, counted out some paper money, and refastened the belt around his middle.

"There's four hundred and fifty," he said when he returned to the kitchen. "The fifty is for whatever extras we pick up—fittings and such like."

He paid McCullough, who passed the money to his wife.

"There you are, Ma," he said quietly. "An answer to your prayers. You get supper, and I'll help Brannigan and Clint with the loadin'!"

"I'm mighty sorry about Jim and Joe, Mrs. McCullough," Clint whispered to the weeping woman. "Me and them boys played together. I'll look after 'em for you."

"They are buried out there by the spring," she whispered.

Clint joined Brannigan and McCullough in the yard. McCullough was a big man with wide, stooping shoulders, and his brown eyes held a brooding sadness because of the sons he had lost. He went to a donkey engine and patted it affectionately.

"I was rigging Betsy for deep drillin'," he told Brannigan. "These 'steaders out here will need deep water before too long. Treat her well, Brannigan, and she'll do a lot for you."

He explained a series of belts and wheels he had constructed, and Brannigan nodded, studying the machinery with keen eyes. Then they began loading the two heavier pieces, using six-by-six timbers for skids.

McCullough rigged up a block-and-tackle arrangement, hooked two of the big Percherons to the double-trees, and they did most of the heavy work. The well rig was cleverly made in sections which could be bolted together, and Brannigan was well-satisfied as he looked over the well-kept tools.

"You'll do well if you keep alive," McCullough told him quietly. "Watch those sheepers, and the cowmen as well. They don't want this country to grow too fast."

"I know," Brannigan agreed.

The iron pipe was stacked and lashed against the sides of the big wagon, and the load was made secure just as the sun went down. The three men washed up and sat down in the kitchen where Mrs. McCullough was working busily, frying chicken for a beautiful feast.

All the talk now was about the well rig, and Brannigan showed a thorough knowledge of the subject. Mrs. McCullough talked to Clint.

"We'll leave day after tomorrow," she told him. "We will drive to the railhead, sell the teams and wagon, and take the train back home from there."

After supper, Clint listened for a while as the other two men talked, then left the house. He was sound asleep when Brannigan sought his own bed roll two hours later, but Brannigan was up and stirring when Clint opened his eyes with the first light of dawn tugging at his reluctant eyelids.

"Have you been up all night?" he asked.

"I slept a good seven hours," Brannigan answered evenly. "We'll get an early start because we're going back with a heavy load."

"I'd hate to work for you for wages," Clint grumbled.

Brannigan turned and looked full at the young fellow.

"I've never known anything but work," he said. "Up to now, it hasn't hurt me any to speak of."

"Didn't you ever take time out to hell around a little?"

"Not much," Brannigan answered shortly. "And whenever I did, I always got into trouble!" He turned abruptly and walked to the house.

Mrs. McCullough called that breakfast was ready, and after the meal she gave Clint a big box of cooked food. He winked at Brannigan.

"So I don't have to eat bacon and beans today," he said cheerfully. "And tomorrow night we'll have our feet under Ma Fairtree's table again."

"You boys be careful," Mrs. McCullough warned. "Especially when you get into sheep country."

"Yeah," McCullough added. "Them sheepers are liable to bush you and set fire to your rig!"

BRANNIGAN shook hands, climbed to the wagon seat, and tipped his hat to Mrs. McCullough. Clint tooled the teams expertly from the yard, and they began the trip back to Terrapin Valley.

They made camp at noon near a small stream. Clint handed Brannigan a bucket and began to fill an oaken barrel strapped to the side of the wagon.

"We won't pass water the way we are heading," he said. "You're cutting away from sheep country."

"And away from trouble," Brannigan agreed.

"You didn't run away from trouble with the Brodies," Clint reminded.

"They brought that trouble to us," Brannigan corrected.

"Putting it that away," Clint murmured, "it sounds like you aim to stay with us."

"I'll stay a spell," Brannigan answered

curtly. "No telling how long."

"Well, whoever it is, they won't find you down here," Clint remarked slyly.

Brannigan turned on him savagely, then checked his anger. He turned away to get the box of lunch.

"Let's eat," he said coldly.

After resting the horses, they spanned in the teams and headed out again on their journey. It was late afternoon when Brannigan saw a distant rider topping a rise. He mounted his saddled horse, and rode ahead with his rifle across his pommel.

The strange rider sat his horse atop the ridge, staring down at the wagon. Then he whirled his horse and disappeared.

"That's one of the Jenkins herders!" Clint Fairtree called to Brannigan. "Like Ben McCullough said, they might try to burn our outfit while we sleep."

"So you take the first watch until midnight," Brannigan answered shortly. "I'll stand the trick from then until dawn."

They rolled along until they came to a buffalo wallow, and Brannigan told Clint to drive on in for shelter. There the wagon could not be seen from the prairie, and Brannigan said they would make a cold camp.

"Stake the horses out at the far end," he told Clint, "and we will guard this end. After we eat some of that fried chicken I'll hunt my soogans and get some sleep."

After eating, Clint took his rifle and stood guard while Brannigan crawled into his blankets. He was asleep instantly, but he awoke with all his senses alert when Clint shook him gently.

"Nothing happened so far," Clint whispered. "It's just after midnight."

"Hit the hay," Brannigan answered. "They might try a raid just before daybreak, so keep your long-gun handy!"

An hour passed as Brannigan watched the distant leaden skyline. A coyote yelped from a high ridge, and was answered almost at once. Brannigan listened intently when the call was repeated. Then he awakened Clint.

Another hour dragged past on leaden feet, but the two men maintained their vigil. Again the call of the coyote was repeated, and now the answer was closer. Brannigan bellied down in the short grass, the walnut stock of his gun against his cheek.

Suddenly he held his breath. Something had moved out in front, then a tall sombrero was skylined against the faint, false dawn. The barrel of a rifle glinted.

Brannigan gauged the distance and squeezed off a shot. Another rifle barked instantly, just as a man screamed hoarsely. Brannigan had beaten the bushwhacker to the shot! A rifle cracked from the other end of the wallow, answered at once by Clint Fairtree's weapon.

Brannigan levered a fresh shell into the breech and slipped back to Clint. He found the young fellow gritting his teeth.

"Bullet burn in the left shoulder," he whispered. "You hurt any?"

"I shot first," Brannigan answered briefly.

CHAPTER IV

Open Range Means Open

THE FALSE dawn brightened the prairie for a brief time. The light would hold for a few minutes then, after a period of darkness, the real dawn would break.

"Let me look at that shoulder," Brannigan said to Clint. "While the light holds."

Clint Fairtree stripped back his shirt, and winced when Brannigan felt of the deep gash.

"Missed the bone," Brannigan murmured thankfully. "I'll get my kit and dress the wound. Nothing serious, but we want to keep it clean."

Clint winced some more as the permanganate bit into the wound and Brannigan bandaged it.

"Good as new," he said quietly, as the darkness crept down over the land again.

"I'll be back at sun-up."

He returned to the far end of the wallow, and hunkered down. The big horses were restless after the shooting, and Brannigan talked to them soothingly until they quieted down. With the first rays of the new sun, Clint Fairtree was beside Brannigan.

"That hombre out on the prairie looks like he's dead," Clint said. "Let's have a look."

They walked out to the body on the ground. Brannigan took one look at the pock-marked face and covered it with the man's big sombrero.

"Juan Lopez, a herder for the Jenkins brothers," Clint said in a muffled voice. "What will we do with him?"

"His pards will look after him," Brannigan told him coldly. "He meant to kill one of the horses!"

"That would have held us here," Clint said thoughtfully. "Then they could have picked us off, or starved us out."

"We'll harness the teams and get goin'," Brannigan said curtly. "I'll out-ride the wagon, but you keep your rifle on the seat."

He saddled and bridled his deep-chested Morgan horse, then mounted to scout ahead of the heavily laden freight wagon. Clint used his long whip to urge the horses out of the deep wallow.

Brannigan quartered to the north, keeping the wagon in sight. There were no homestead shacks dotting the prairie, and no fences. The sage-covered land was free for whoever could hold it, and find water for their stock.

After two hours, Brannigan dropped back to ride with the wagon. The huge draft horses were laboring in their collars, and Clint Fairtree was doing a skinner's job to avoid chuck-holes and shallow wallows, but his young face showed strain.

"Getting close to Jenkins range—sheep country," he told Brannigan.

Brannigan wrinkled his nose, his eyes squinted into the distance, then he nodded.

"Sheep coming down from the north," he said. "Wave after wave of 'em."

"I don't see anything," Clint complained.

"Look at that rifle-notch between those two hills," Brannigan ordered. "You'll see the skyline waving and flickering, and when the wind is right, your nose will tell you the rest."

Clint stared, and nodded. "I can see the skyline move now," he admitted. "They'll cross in front of us."

"They'll part to let us pass," Brannigan said confidently.

"Sheep don't have a lick of sense," Clint argued. "Besides, the horses are getting tired, and they start hard when I have to stop the wheels from rolling."

"So I'll ride ahead and clear the way," Brannigan answered stubbornly. "This is a free range. That means for everyone!"

Once more he rode away from the wagon, quartering now to meet the oncoming flock of sheep. He could see three mounted herders, and three sheep dogs were also helping to keep the dirty-white waves moving. One of the herders came galloping to meet Brannigan.

The wagon now was a half-mile in the rear. The sheep were a mile away, but coming on fast. Brannigan touched his horse with a spur to close the gap between himself and the oncoming rider. His right hand touched his six-shooter to make sure the gun would not hang in leather if he needed it.

BRANNIGAN'S eyes widened as he saw the garb of the approaching rider. Here was no ordinary herder in dirty and worn attire. This lanky rider was wearing tailored twill trousers and short jacket, with an embroidered shirt of white silk, an expensive Stetson, and hand-made boots. A brace of Colt .45s was strapped about his lean hips.

He raced up and slid his horse to a stop directly in front of Brannigan's mount. Brannigan whirled his horse, and was behind the startled sheepman when the fellow made a stop.

"Turn south!" the sheepman bellowed. "I'm Jasper Jenkins, and we control this

part of the range!"

"You can have it," Brannigan declared, "after the wagon passes. Give the word to your boys to held back those woolies!"

"I give the orders here!" Jenkins barked angrily. "Tell your skinner to bend south so's to not cut into my flocks!"

"Nuh-uh," Brannigan refused. "That's badlands to the south, and the going is too rough for a wagon. Hold your sheep up ten minutes, and we'll all be happy."

Jasper Jenkins turned in his saddle and waved his left arm in a gesture for his men to come on. Brannigan waved for the sheep to stay back. Jenkins whirled his horse, slapping for his right holster.

Brannigan had anticipated that. He spoke coldly from over the cocked six-shooter which had leaped to his right hand.

"Give your boys the word to hold those sheep," he said, "or you can start for your equalizer again!"

Jenkins grinned broadly. "Too late now," he said with a chuckle. "The sheep are on the run!"

Brannigan rode up to Jenkins and straight-armed the startled sheepman from the saddle. Brannigan was on the ground instantly, leaving his horse with trailing reins. He kicked the gun from Jenkins' right holster, slapped down with his own weapon to knock the other from Jenkins' hand when the sheepman grabbed the gun in his left holster.

Then Brannigan did a strange thing. He stood facing the sheep with legs spread wide apart. Both hands went up over his head as he called sharply:

"You, Shep! *Attención*, Perro!"

Two of the intelligent sheep dogs lifted their heads. Brannigan waved his arm toward the right, repeated the motion. The three dogs, with short barks, raced to turn the running sheep.

The sheep passed within two hundred yards of the creaking wagon. One of the herders raced after them, but the other drew a rifle from his saddle scabbard as he galloped toward his boss who was snarling defiantly as he faced Brannigan.

Clint Fairtree stopped his team, picked up his rifle, and levered a shell into the breech. He yelled a warning at the herder with the rifle:

"Don't cock that gun, Sheepie! I've got you covered!"

Brannigan picked up one of Jenkins' six-shooters, jacked the shells from the cylinder, and threw the gun into a creosote bush. He did the same with the sheepman's other weapon, mounted without losing the drop, and motioned for Clint to come along with the wagon.

"Open range means open, Jenkins," he told the glaring sheepman. "No hard feelings."

"You'll pay for this!" Jasper Jenkins promised wrathfully. "And you'll pay for the death of Juan Lopez!"

"Kinda slipped, didn't you?" Brannigan asked. "Admitting you sent Lopez and his pard to bush us."

"We were protecting our range!" Jenkins shouted. "You killed Lopez without giving him a chance!"

"Who told you that?" Brannigan asked. "That other hombre? He or nobody else could see a thing for sure in the pitch dark."

Clint Fairtree called to ask if Brannigan needed any help. Brannigan told him to keep on driving, that he'd catch up with him later.

"So you're with the Fairtree whelp!" Jenkins shouted. "Now we know where to look."

"So will we," Brannigan agreed. "You try anything on the Circle F, I'll ride to your sheep outfit and give you a helping of the same. The name is Brannigan, Mister!"

"Brannigan, eh?" Jenkins said. "I'll remember the name!"

"It's an easy name to remember," Brannigan answered coldly.

He pouched his six-shooter, nodded to Jenkins, touched the Morgan with his spurs, and rode after the wagon without a backward glance. . . .

WHEN the lumbering freight wagon reached Terrapin Valley, John Fairtree rode out to meet it. Another big

man rode with him.

"Howdy, Clint," the big man called heartily as the young fellow hauled his sweating Percherons to a halt. "Have any trouble?"

"Nothing we couldn't handle," Clint answered importantly. "Brannigan, meet my brother George."

George Fairtree greeted Brannigan cordially, then saw his brother's stained shirt sleeve. "You've been in a gun fight," he accused.

"Just a bullet burn," Clint said lightly. "But I wounded that sheeper, and Brannigan tallied his pard!" He turned to his father. "Jasper Jenkins sent two of his herders out to bush me and Brannigan last night, Dad. In a buffalo wallow where we had the horses and wagon hid. The dead man was Juan Lopez."

"They won't stop now," John Fairtree said heavily.

"They didn't then!" Clint declared. "Jasper Jenkins came riding down with his herders and a big flock of woolies. They meant to crowd us down in the badlands, but Brannigan reasoned with old Jasper, you might say."

"Jasper's a dangerous gunman," George reminded. "Fast as a snake and just as treacherous."

"There wasn't a shot fired," Clint boasted. "Brannigan beat old Jasper to the draw, pulled his stingers, then yelled at the dogs. When he waved to the right those dogs turned the flock just as slick as grease. What's Ma got for supper?"

Brannigan sighed, looked at George's sombre face, and spoke quietly to John Fairtree.

"Trouble rode down to meet you, John. What happened?"

John Fairtree appeared startled, but he answered:

"Brodie's men killed Carl Gary, who had a quarter section south of us. The funeral was this afternoon."

"They rode down and offered to buy Carl out for three dollars an acre," George Fairtree said harshly. "There was a stranger with old Buff, a gent by the name of Cosper. He baited Carl into goin' for his gun, then let Carl have it plumb center!"

Brannigan's sensitive nostrils flared, and that burning look came into his eyes.

"Cosper, eh?" he repeated. "A hired killer!"

"You know him?" John Fairtree asked quickly.

"Tall man, about six feet, reddish hair, little greenish eyes, a scar across his upper lip under his nose?" Brannigan asked crisply.

"That's him," George Fairtree answered. "I'd gone over to give Carl a hand with some blacksmithing, and I was gun-naked."

"I've met him," Brannigan said briefly. "I want to meet him again!"

"It's show-down, Brannigan," John Fairtree said heavily. "Buff Brodie says he'll buy the Gary place, or start tearing down their fences Tuesday."

"If they tear down Carl's fences," George said, "our fences won't be worth much."

"I'd buy Carl's widow out, but I'm short of ready cash," John Fairtree said wearily. "And Carl had the only forge and blacksmith shop in the settlement."

"Do you mind if I ride down to see Mrs. Gary with George?" Brannigan said to John Fairtree. "We'll be back in time for supper."

"You won't ever regret it, Brannigan," old Fairtree said.

Brannigan jerked his head at George Fairtree, and the big fellow rode ahead to rub stirrups with Brannigan.

"You're going to offer to buy the Gary place," George said bluntly. "Five dollars an acre is a fair price, and another thousand for the improvements and shop."

"Thanks," Brannigan murmured. "I was wondering about price."

They passed the Fairtree homestead, turned in at the next gate, and rode into a big, well-kept yard. A pretty young woman came to the door.

"Glad you got back, George!" she called. "Buff Brodie sent a cowboy over to offer Grace four dollars an acre."

"Brannigan, meet my wife, Rosemary,"

Fairtree made the introduction. "Rosemary, this is—Brannigan."

"Howdy, ma'am," Brannigan said, and touched the brim of his black Stetson.

"Won't you come in?" Rosemary invited.

Brannigan removed his hat and followed Rosemary into the front room. Grace Gary rose and held out her hand.

"I'm so glad you and George are here, Mr. Brannigan," she said tremulously. "I don't know what to do. I want to go home to Wisconsin, and I don't want to sell to Brodie."

"I can make an offer, ma'am," Brannigan said. "I'll give five dollars an acre, a thousand for the shop and tools, and another five hundred for the improvements. Would you consider it, ma'am?"

GRACE GARY grasped Brannigan's hands. "Twenty-three hundred!" she whispered. "Do you mean it?"

"I have the money with me," he answered simply. "John Fairtree will see that the papers are legal and in form, and I'll pay you at once."

"Then everything is yours except what I'll carry in my suitcase and trunk," Grace Gary answered. "God bless you, Brannigan!"

"My wife and I are staying here with Grace tonight," George said. "Mother will ride with us to the railhead at Bass, so tell her to be ready for an early start."

Brannigan rode back to the Fairtree place, off-saddled in the big barn, gave his horse a generous measure of grain, and filled the manger with fragrant prairie hay. Then he washed and entered the big kitchen.

Mrs. Fairtree took both his hands, and kissed him on the cheek. "Thanks for looking after my boy," she said. "I didn't worry a mite."

"Everything was fine except bacon and beans," Clint declared. "Did you buy the Gary place, Brannigan?"

Brannigan nodded as he rolled a brown-paper cigarette. "George said for Ma to be ready early in the morning for the drive to Bass."

"You didn't pay too much, did you?" Fairtree asked.

"Twenty-three hundred, everything included," Branigan told him. "Paid for it with money I earned up north, and I've got an idea, John. Most of the claims run parallel with the creek, and end-to-end. It's fenced now, but my idea is to build another fence six feet inside that one, and five strands high—just in case either Jenkins or Brodie stampedes their stock down this way."

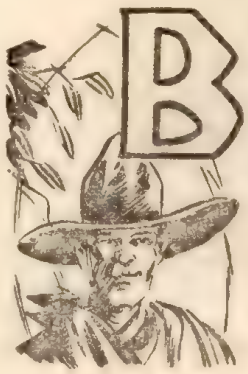
"You'll live here with us?" Ma Fairtree asked anxiously. "Instead of down there alone?"

"I'm still working for John," Brannigan reminded. "I'd like to leave it that way, if it suits him."

"I was hoping you would," Fairtree answered, with a sigh of satisfaction.

CHAPTER V

A Stake in the Game



BRANNIGAN watched Ma Fairtree's supper preparations, sniffed the savory odors, and settled back to smoke. Clint was making much of his wound.

"I won't be able to do any heavy work for a few days," he told his father.

"Yes, you'll have to favor that shoulder," John Fairtree agreed. "So you can handle the horses. I've been hurt twice that bad, many's the time, and still did me a full day's work."

Brannigan smiled. He liked the give-and-take of family life, and appreciated having a place in the family circle.

"This man Brad Cosper," John Fairtree remarked. "Better watch yourself when you are around him, Brannigan."

"Don't get to talking now," Ma Fairtree said firmly. "Supper is ready, and the boys are starved."

Clint made a rush for the table. After the blessing, John Fairtree filled the

plates, and all did full justice to the food. When the meal was finished, Brannigan went to his room and came back with a box of tools to clean his guns.

He broke down his six-shooters and carefully cleaned and oiled every moving part. Clint was running a soapy rag through the barrel of his Winchester rifle when Brannigan started on his own Springfield rifle.

"War on two fronts," John Fairtree said broodingly. "Cattlemen and the sheepers are both out to run us off the range."

"With Brannigan to ramrod the fighting, we ought to stay," Clint said boastfully.

"Mostly I want to develop water here," Brannigan said brusquely. "The Gary place is lower than this, but it's still higher than the other claims. I aim to throw up a dirt tank on the upper piece, pipe the overflow from your reservoir to that tank, then we'll never want for water, no matter how dry it gets."

"And if we drill deep enough, we won't have to pump," Fairtree agreed. "We can feed-finish our cattle and hogs, and make it pay us a good price for our hay and grain."

Half an hour later the household was asleep, but Brannigan was up with the dawn, and Ma Fairtree was already busy in the kitchen. It was a good forty-mile drive to Bass she explained.

After breakfast, Brannigan's chief interest was the well rig on the big freight wagon. He drove to the high land which would be used for a reservoir site, and faced the wagon in position for unloading. He rigged up a dead-man and post on which to fasten the block-and-tackle and set his six-by-six skids.

"We loaded this outfit, and Clint will know what to do," he said. "We'll set the engine on those short posts, and those old dead rots will furnish all the fuel we'll need when we start drilling."

With the sectional derrick unloaded and neatly stacked, the heavy donkey engine was maneuvered slowly down the skids. John Fairtree kept his eyes on some boxes and kegs, which Brannigan

At Christmas

By TEX MUMFORD

When Christmas comes to Western range,
In all its golden glow,
Our thoughts turn to the pioneers,
The men of long ago.

The men who fought the wilderness,
And saw the struggle through—
And made good will and peace on earth
For Westerners come true!

said held dynamite and black powder.

"The dynamite will do most of the removal work for us," he told Fairtree, "but we want to save the wood for fuel, and the rock for the higher walls. We'll need some help for a few days."

"The neighbors will help," Fairtree answered confidently. "They will share in the water, so every man will share in the work."

Fairtree was enthusiastic over the simplicity of Brannigan's plan. The roots and stumps would be blown out, the massive rocks split up to provide the higher side walls of the big reservoir, and the inside scraped to provide dirt for the side-walls and fill. Then the deep well would be drilled right in the center.

"I bought forty sacks of cement from McCullough," Brannigan said.

THEY worked until noon, then ate the cold lunch which Ma Fairtree had left for them, covered with a big red tablecloth. As they were smoking after the meal, John Fairtree was thoughtful.

"Tomorrow night," he said, "Buff Brodie will be ridin' down for his answer about the Gary place. He'll have some of his men with him."

"Is he coming here?" Brannigan asked, but his eyes smoldered with a strange fire.

"He'll be down at Carlson's store and bar," Fairtree answered. "Carlson carries staples and drygoods, and orders what we need from outside."

"It's a fine new land," Brannigan said. "A raw land, needing only water and work to make it productive."

"If we can hold it," Fairtree said with a sigh. "The Almanac says it'll be a dry year."

"Which means that the cattle and sheep will try to get at your crops," Brannigan remarked. He added meaningly: "And water."

"The creek didn't get too low last year," Clint interrupted.

Brannigan shook his head.

"What if the creek does go dry?" he asked. "Has Brodie got any tanks against a drought?"

"He has some small ones run by windmills," said Fairtree. "But if the creek should go dry, Brodie would be in trouble on this lower range."

"So we'll get up that double fence pronto," Brannigan said.

They returned to work and Brannigan drilled some holes with a long hand auger. He tamped half sticks of dynamite into the holes, set his fuses, and filled the holes with moist earth. Clint started to run.

"The charge will explode down and sidewise, Clint," Brannigan called. "Just stand behind the engine."

He lighted two fuses and joined the other two behind the engine. Two muffled explosions boomed faintly. Two huge stumps rose slowly, then settled back in the craters the charges had made.

"I'll bet they didn't hear that noise down on the Pederson place," Clint scoffed.

"It takes an expert to handle powder like that," John Fairtree said, as he fastened a logging chain around one of the big stumps preparatory to snaking it out with a team.

After it had been dragged out, John Fairtree stared down at the brown sandy loam.

"That shows what sub-soiling would do," he said to Brannigan. "A man could raise anything in soil like this."

As the shadows began to creep across the endless prairie, and the ring of stumps had increased, the teams were put up and fed, and the men went back to the house.

"I'm cook tonight," John Fairtree said with a grin. "I'll cut steaks from a quarter of beef, fry spuds and eggs, and there's green-apple pie." He turned to Clint. "And I don't want any remarks from you, my bucko," he warned.

"I didn't say nothing," Clint muttered.

"You was thinking something, though," his father answered tartly. "You'd waste away to a shadow if it wasn't for your Ma's cooking."

Brannigan listened and smiled. He liked and respected these people of the soil, with their simplicity and natural good

manners, with no artificial veneer. Such people would never say yes when they meant no.

John Fairtree had called a meeting of the homesteaders so Brannigan could talk to them about mutual defense, and soon after supper had been eaten, the men began arriving. All were armed with rifles and six-shooters, and their faces were grave because of the recent shadow of death that had fallen among them.

Fairtree introduced each man to Brannigan. There was Olaf Pederson, a giant Swede, and his married son Gustaf, twenty-eight; Joe Ferguson, who talked with a Scotch burr; and Wilhelm Mueller, a Hollander. Clyde Ferris was an Englishman; and his two sons, Carter and Frank, were stocky, powerful men with families of their own.

Terry Sullivan was a smiling Irishman with a son nearly a foot taller than himself. Mike Sullivan, twenty-five and thewed like a giant, was proud of his strength and of his two small children. Claude Brewster was a tall man of dignity, and his correct speech marked him as a man of education. He was forty-five; and his son was twenty-two. Brewster had been a lawyer, but he worked as hard as any man in the settlement.

WHEN they were seated, Fairtree studied the faces of his neighbors and said:

"This meeting has been called to organize our defenses. You all know what happened to Carl Gary. Unless we organize fully, we could all meet the same fate."

"What about the law?" Joe Ferguson asked, then flushed with chagrin. "I'm sorry," he apologized quickly. "We are the law."

"Right," Claude Brewster agreed quickly, "but we need a leader, a fighting man without fear to direct the defense." He looked keenly at Brannigan.

Fairtree told the men then about Brannigan's idea of a double fence facing the creek. This was finally agreed upon. Then Fairtree held up a big hand.

"Brannigan," he said, "has seen the results of the long, dry years. He has bought a well rig for deep drilling, to insure us all of a plentiful supply of water." Quickly he explained about the reservoir, the huge overflow tank on the Gary place, and the need for man labor.

"I don't know," Clyde Ferris said. "What if Brodie buys the Gary place? He'd be right in the middle of us."

"Brannigan bought the Gary place last night," Fairtree announced. "The overflow tank will be on his land, and the water can be sent down to the lower land by gravity. It will take men and teams, and scrapers to make that tank, and the Almanac predicts a dry year!"

Big Olaf Pederson spoke up quickly. "Count on me and Gustaf with our teams."

One after another, every man promised help. Fairtree told them to come ready for work in the morning, then called on Brannigan.

"Tell us about defenses, Brannigan," he said.

Brannigan stretched to his feet. He studied each earnest face, and liked what he saw. There was about him only a superb confidence, and something which told of a reservoir of unused strength and power.

"There will be danger from fires," he began. "Two men must be on guard every night, along the fences facing the creeks. We'll stand four hours each. Have buckets and water handy near your houses and barns, and—*keep your powder dry!*"

"What about Brodie and his hired gunhands?" Claude Brewster asked, and looked steadily at Brannigan.

"I'll see him tomorrow night at Carlson's place," Brannigan answered. "Don't leave your places unguarded." He sat down.

"By yiminy, we will fight!" Olaf Pederson declared earnestly. "We will be here early in the morning with our equipment. Good night, neighbors!"

The homesteaders returned to their own homes. John Fairtree seemed a trifle uneasy.

"You'll guard yourself well tomorrow night, Brannigan?" he asked.

Brannigan smiled. "I promise. There will be enough of us there to keep Brodie honest."

"But what about this killer, Brad Cosper?" Fairtree insisted. "I've heard about such, but I've never before met a man who sold his guns!"

"I once sold mine," Brannigan said evenly. "Landhogs were grabbing a lot of range when I was up north. Now they are trying to do the same thing here, and I've got a stake in the game this time!" He hestitated, then said grimly: "But I've never killed a man who didn't ask for a killing. . . . I'm turning in."

As he left the room Clint stared at his father, who slowly shook his head.

"He's no cold killer, son," he told Clint. "Remember that!"

The next day was an important one in Terrapin Valley. Huge teams of Percherons and Clydes began to converge on the Circle F as soon as John Fairtree and Brannigan were at work. Three of the neighbors brought scrapers with which to make the earth-fills; others had brought axes, sledges, and cross-cut saws.

Brannigan set off a dozen small charges of dynamite under some of the biggest stumps and had them hauled out. With these out of the way, he showed the teamsters where to dredge the loamy soil to be used later for fill.

BY MID-MORNING a deep hole had been scraped in the center of the little hill. Brannigan set charges under several big rocks, and the men watched the demolition with eagerness, marveling how Brannigan seemed to konw just where his powder would do the most good. With each explosion, great quantities of broken rock were sent showering into the air.

Olaf Pederson, who had worked in the quarries of Sweden, showed his son, Gustaf, how to use the sledges and steel wedges to crack the stubborn granite, and shape it into blocks.

Neighbor women took over the Fairtree kitchen. The horses were fed at noon, and dinner was ready for the sweating men.

John Fairtree smiled with satisfaction. Now the homesteaders had a thorough grasp of Brannigan's plan, and it was plain that not only had they accepted it, but had accepted him as one of themselves. And the satisfaction that he felt in no longer being a drifter without a definite purpose in life glowed in his eyes.

Men from many nations were here, working together for their common good, building something permanent in a raw new land.

After dinner, Brannigan hurried back to the work. He took young Clint for a helper.

A giant of a rock occupied the very center of the hill. Brannigan studied the lower portions, and started to dig.

"This one is just sitting here," he explained to Clint. "I'm sure there's no rock footing underneath, and if I'm right, that's where we'll drill the well!"

CHAPTER VI

Repping for Grace

CLINT watched Brannigan wield pick and shovel, and deepen the hole under the base of the towering rock. When the hole was down four feet, Brannigan called for the hand auger, and drilled down another six feet.

"I mean to split this old rock," he explained. "I'm going to use a full keg of black powder in two charges, and we'll see what happens."

The men came down from the house and watched with intent interest. Brannigan tamped in his charges, covered them with earth, and looked to his long fuses.

"Get back quite a far piece this time, men," he called. "I aim to lift that old rock out of there, and split it up the mid-

dle at the same time. Find cover from flyin' rock!"

Brannigan handed Clint a match. "I've set three-minute fuses, Clint," he said. "You light that one to the left. I'll light this one on the right. Then we'll leg it for timber!"

When they had lighted the fuses and raced for a grove of oaks, it seemed an interminable time while the sputtering sparks crept closer to the packed earth. Then a dull booming explosion shook the ground, followed almost at once by another blast. Echoes rocketed back from the distant hills, then the sky was filled with flying dust and showering rocks.

"By yiminy, that was a good one!" Olaf Pederson chuckled, then rubbed his eyes. "That rock, she is gone!"

Brannigan led the rush back as the dust cleared away. Now the deep center was filled with large broken slabs of granite, and the bulk of the huge rock was lying against the north wall of the hole. John Fairtree rubbed his big calloused hands.

"Enough rock for one wall on top," he told Brannigan. "Let's get to work, men!"

Sledge hammers rang musically as the men started to break up and shape the shattered slabs of granite. Clint drove into the depression with a stone-boat behind a team of Percherons, and as the stone was loaded, he hauled it to places designated by Brannigan. By the middle of the afternoon, most of the rock had been removed, and the scrapers began to work in the depression, hollowing out the middle, and hauling their loads away to make the sides of the great fill.

"I can see it now," John Fairtree said, almost reverently. "An abundant supply of water from a deep well, to fill this reservoir. Then that big earth tank down on your place to take the overflow. Pipes or ditches running from there to the lower land. It was here all the time, but none of us could see it."

For the first time in many years the hard expression of concentrated bitterness had left Brannigan's face, and in his blue eyes was the look of a visionary.

"Plenty of water will mean different crops." he said. "We can raise alfalfa, and maybe cotton."

Fairtree frowned as he gazed out across Terrapin Creek to open range. "I can't quite see cotton fields down here this close to cattle country," he muttered.

"There's cotton in Texas now," Brannigan reminded, "and they raise more cattle down there than anywhere else."

John Fairtree suddenly asked, watching Brannigan's face: "What time are you going to Carlson's store?"

The look of serenity left Brannigan's handsome face, and the smoldering flames began to blaze deep in his eyes. He was once more the fighting man, brought back to stern realities.

"Seven o'clock," he answered. "I'd rather you wouldn't say anything about it to Mrs. Fairtree."

"She knows," Fairtree answered bluntly. "There won't be any keeping George or Clint away, so I'll stay and stand the first guard."

Brannigan knew that John Fairtree was making a sacrifice. The big solid man would rather be with him when he met Buff Brodie and Brad Cosper than anything he could name.

"Yonder comes George and the womenfolks now," Fairtree said with a sigh. "We better quit work for the day."

The homesteaders were leaving for their own places, after assuring Brannigan that they would return in the morning. Although nothing was said in so many words, Brannigan knew that all who could get away would be at Carlson's store.

BRANNIGAN was sluicing the grime from his muscular body when George Fairtree came to him at the horse trough.

"I'm worried, Brannigan," George admitted honestly. "I saw Carl Gary killed. I never saw anyone so fast with a gun as Brad Cosper."

Brannigan continued with his ablutions. His face showed nothing but the utmost confidence.

"Maybe Cosper won't ask for a showdown with all our men present," George said hopefully.

"Maybe he won't," Brannigan agreed. "If he does, he and I will settle it."

"The cattlemen will know about the reservoir," George said bluntly. "We heard those explosions ten miles away."

"Thought you would," Brannigan agreed. "But the blasts were not on land in the public domain."

"Some of the claims ain't proved up yet," George pointed out.

"Possession is nine-tenths of the law," Brannigan countered, and he put on his shirt. "Did you see anything of those sheepmen?"

"Not a sign," George answered. He stopped and offered his big right hand. "Good luck," he said, and his deep voice was husky.

When the two men entered the big kitchen, Ma Fairtree greeted Brannigan with a happy smile.

"You certainly started things moving around here," she told him. "You must be as hungry as a bear."

"Me and Clint both," Brannigan answered with a warm smile. "We missed you, didn't we, Clint?"

"I'll tell a man," Clint said promptly. "Did I do a day's work, wounded and weak as I am?"

"You did that, feller," Brannigan praised. "There were times when you even forgot all about that little old scratch on your shoulder. Like when you was lighting that fuse."

"You see, Ma?" Clint appealed to his mother. "A hand don't get any credit around here for suffering in silence. Unless he takes on and bellers like a bull, no one pays him no mind!"

"'The wheel that squeaks the loudest gets the grease'," Brannigan quoted.

He went to his room and dressed with meticulous care. He put on a wool shirt of dark maroon, fashioned a small silk tie expertly, and tucked the shirt down into the tailored gray trousers of heavy whipcord. Then he stamped into his hand-made boots of soft leather, strapped his shell-studded belt about his lean hips, and fastened the tie-backs low around his right thigh.

Brannigan tilted his holster to his liking, and dropped his hand like a flash. The move did not suit him. Taking a small bottle of some odorless oil from his bedroll, he poured a few drops into the one palm, and kneaded the oil thoroughly into his tanned fingers. Now he felt more at ease as the fatigue poisons of hard labor seemed to leave him with the soiled clothing he had discarded.

"Come and get it!" Ma Fairtree called, and Brannigan joined the family in the big kitchen.

John Fairtree looked at him, but said nothing as he took his place at the head of the long table. Clint stared with undisguised admiration, and George narrowed his somber gray eyes.

"You look real nice in your town rigging," Ma told Brannigan. "Are you going somewhere?" Then she suddenly remembered. "Must you, Brannigan?" she asked wistfully.

"I must, Ma," Brannigan answered gently. "But don't worry none about me."

He smiled at her and took his seat beside Clint at the table. Clint felt the texture of Brannigan's fine shirt.

"Must have set you back a month's pay," he said judicially. "But a tophand ought to have tophand rigging and gear, I always say."

"So you can say the blessing," John Fairtree said sternly, and he bowed his head.

"Lord, make us thankful for what we are about to receive," Clint recited glibly. "Amen!"

"That was short and sweet," Rosemary remarked, and a general laugh dispelled the tension.

Brannigan ate like a man who has only pleasant thoughts on his mind. John Fairtree watched him with admiration.

"I aim to get me an outfit like Brannigan's, come next pay-day," Clint announced. "It does somethin' for a feller to have good clothes that fit him. He don't look so much like a clod-buster."

"Is there anything wrong with tilling the good soil?" his father asked sternly.

"Nuh-uh," Clint answered. "Only a man don't have to live in work-clothes all the time."

MA FAIRTREE served a peach cobbler, and glowed as she watched her family eat. Clint was first away from the table. He went to his room to change his clothes. He was wearing a heavy gunbelt and holster when he came out in his best suit, and he tilted the handle of the .44 Colt, Frontier model, to fit the hang of his big right hand.

"I'm ready whenever you are," he told Brannigan. "I'll side you just like I did in that last ruckus."

"And a man couldn't ask for a better pard," Brannigan declared heartily. "But this time you stay out of it, Clint. I'm not looking for trouble, but if it comes, it will be between Cosper and me. Remember what I say!"

"You heard what Brannigan said, Clint," John Fairtree added. "You and George will join the rest of the men, just in case Brodie rides down with his crew. Take your orders from Brannigan, and do it the way he says!"

"Yes, Dad," Clint answered respectfully. He realized that this was no time for frivolity, and that he was being accorded a man's stature in the settlement.

Brannigan sat down and rolled a quirly. As he fired his smoke and relaxed completely he did not seem like a man who had worked twelve hours at hard manual labor. He savored the tase of his tobacco, just as he appreciated his food. When his cigarette was finished, he arose and put on his best black Stetson. He cuffed the wide brim down to shade his eyes, touched his holstered pistol with the tips of his fingers, and walked to the door.

"We should be home early," he said quietly. "That was the best meal I ever tasted, Ma Fairtree."

He touched the brim of his hat to the two women, walked into the yard, and went to the barn for his Morgan horse. George and Clint Fairtree joined him, and the three men rode from the yard, heading for Carlson's store, not more than a mile to the south on the trail.

George rode on Brannigan's right, with Clint to the left. They dwarfed Brannigan in height and bulk, and they seemed even taller because Brannigan, like most cowboys, rode deep in the saddle. That way he could meet any sudden or unexpected movement of the horse under him. Clint Fairtree had always ridden tall in the saddle, to appear even bigger than he was. Now he watched Brannigan, settled his hips against the cantle, and allowed his shoulders and back to settle down.

"After all, we ain't in a parade," he said out loud.

"What's that?" George asked curiously.

"Nothing," Clint grunted and indicated the store ahead. "Looks like some of the men have already reached Carlson's."

The three men swung to the ground and tied their horses at the long whittled rack in front of the store. Inside, Clyde Ferris and Joe Ferguson were having a beer, and they invited the new arrivals to join them. Brannigan refused with murmured thanks, bought a supply of smoking tobacco, and several books of papers.

Sam Carlson, the storekeeper, was a tall, wide-shouldered man of forty-five. His round face expressed the soberness of his thoughts, and the six-shooter on his right leg seemed to be out of place.

"Most of the boys will stay outside, Brannigan. I won't have that Two B crew breaking up my store," he said gruffly.

"Good idea," Brannigan agreed.

Carlson returned to the short bar where he served draught beer, leaving Brannigan to look over a mail-order catalogue.

As darkness came to the valley, other homesteaders rode up to the store and tied their horses at the rail. Ferguson and Ferris sipped their beer slowly at the far end of the bar, with the Fairtree brothers at the grocery shelves off to one side. Brannigan stood just inside the doors, in a small alcove, idly turning the illustrated pages of the catalogue.

"It's seven o'clock," Sam Carlson announced.

Hoof-beats sounded outside, followed by the thud of spurred boots to the ground. The door opened, and Buff Brodie entered with his son. They were followed by Jud Cummings, and a tall, scar-faced man who wore the crossed belts of the two-gun man. Brad Cosper, the killer of Carl Gary.

THE four men walked to the bar, where all ordered beer except Cosper.

"Whiskey straight, and a chaser of the same!" he sneered at Carlson.

"Three dollars for the bottle," Carlson said quietly. "You can take it with you."

Buff Brodie slapped a ten-dollar gold piece on the little bar.

"I'll pay," he said curtly. "Who's repping for the late Carl Gary?"

"I am," a deep voice answered from the alcove, and Brannigan stepped forward.

The Two B men appeared startled. They had not seen Brannigan in the store. Brad Cosper faced him with both thumbs hooked in his shell-studded belts.

Carlson set a bottle of whiskey on the bar.

"Draw the cork, bar-dog!" Cosper said.

Carlson reached for a corkscrew and drew the cork from the bottle. Cosper filled a small glass with his left hand, never taking his eyes from Brannigan.

"You say you are repping for Grace Gary?" Brodie asked Brannigan.

"She turned down your offer," Brannigan answered. "Someone else bettered your offer and bought the whole thing, including equipment."

"I see." Buff Brodie said. "Would that somebody be you?"

"I have the bill of sale, and it has been sent for recordin'," Brannigan answered promptly.

"I'll double what you paid for it," Brodie offered. "I want that shop equipment."

"So do I," Brannigan answered. "It's not for sale at any price."

"I heard a lot of blasting down this way," Brodie went on. "I'd like to know what it was all about."

"It was on private land," Brannigan answered courteously, but he was watching Brad Cosper. "I didn't ride over to the Two B and ask how you were running your business."

"That shows you are smart," Brodie commented. "You also bought Ben McCullough's well rig!"

"You've been making medicine with those sheepmen," Brannigan said drily.

"What's it to you, Brannigan?" Cosper interrupted suddenly.

Brannigan tightened his lips. He had been wondering when Cosper would take over the play.

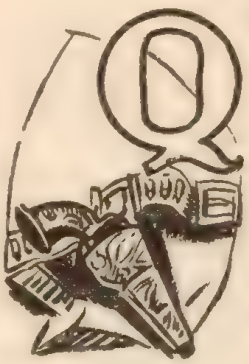
"I'm a land-owner now, Cosper," he said. "You're still what you always have been—a hired killer. It's your play!"

Junior Brodie was facing the Fairtree brothers. Clint was glaring at the younger Brodie, but George cautioned his brother to silence.

"Keep still and listen!" he whispered sternly.

CHAPTER VII

Showdown Requested



QUICKLY Brad Cosper tossed off his drink and wiped his thick lips with the back of his left hand. His right was close to his gun, and his small eyes were almost closed as he glared at Brannigan.

"When a man starts in to killing snakes, he better clean out the whole nest," he snarled. "I should have finished what I started up in Oregon!"

"But you high-tailed after your brother shot too late," Brannigan answered him viciously.

Brad Cosper's face twisted with anger. "My brother was killed on a sneak!" he accused in a hoarse whisper.

"So was mine," Brannigan answered. "I'm the last of the clan!"

"You called the turn," Cosper sneered. "The *last!*"

"So you two know each other," Buff Brodie said.

Brannigan did not take his eyes away from Cosper's hands. They were glowing coals as he watched his old enemy.

Brad Cosper was measuring Brannigan —and his chances for survival. The vibrations of their hatred were felt by every man in the room.

"I traveled ten thousand miles and spent three years to cut your sign," Brannigan said grimly. "I'm going to kill you!"

It was merely a calm statement of fact. Men shuddered, but Brad Cosper only shrugged to show his contempt.

"You can try," he sneered.

Even as he spoke, his right hand rapped down with fingers wrapping around the handle of his gun. Brannigan's right hand slapped down and came up in a blurring burst of speed. Orange flame lanced from the muzzle of his leaping six-shooter, just as Cosper's gun cleared leather.

The two explosions made a stuttering echo. One of them had shot—second! Cosper stiffened under the impact of a heavy slug that tore through his heart, took a backward step, and unhinged at the knees. Then he crashed face-forward.

Brannigan had shifted like a panther. His smoking gun now covered the Brodies. Joe Ferguson had a gun on Jud Cummings, who leaned against the bar with both hands shoulder-high.

"Was it a fair shake?" Brannigan asked Buff Brodie. "Did he ask for show-down?"

"He asked for it," Buff Brodie admitted reluctantly. "You win."

"How about you, Junior?" Brannigan asked. "Are you satisfied?"

"No, by hell!" young Brodie shouted. "Holster your iron and draw me evens!"

Brannigan studied the angry young face, then shook his head.

"You wouldn't have a chance," he said positively.

In one swift move Junior Brodie unbuckled his gun-belt, allowed it to drop to the floor. He faced Brannigan in a crouch.

"Maybe not with guns," he said savagely. "Maybe you'd like to take me like you took Monk Saunders!"

Brannigan's eyes narrowed. Junior Brodie was perhaps twenty pounds heavier than he, and two inches taller. He hestitated, then asked:

"Straight fightin'?"

"Clean fighting, if you can fight clean!" young Brodie challenged.

Brannigan jerked his head toward the door.

"We'll do our fighting outside, to save Carlson trouble," he said. "Clint, get outside and tell the boys not to interfere!"

Buff Brodie watched with his head turned in a curious manner that was characteristic when he was intently interested. George Fairtree and Clint went outside. Buff Brodie followed.

Brodie was facing a crowd of cowboys and homesteaders as Junior came out, followed by Brannigan.

"No interference, you Two B men. This is to be a fair fight. That likewise goes for you sheepers!"

Brannigan let his eyes run over the crowd. Then he saw Jasper and Jim Jenkins with three other herders. All were heavily armed, and were being watched by homesteaders.

"I'll bet a thousand on Brannigan!" Jasper Jenkins said.

"Took!" Buff Brodie answered instantly. "Any of you other hombres want to get your feet wet?"

"I do," George Fairtree said. "I need some new equipment, and you might as well pay for it. Five hundred on Brannigan!"

BUFF BRODIE drew out a thick roll of currency and counted off some bills. These he handed to Sam Carlson, and waited while George Fairtree and Jasper Jenkins covered his bets.

Brannigan could see that here were all the elements of impending tragedy, needing only one careless shot to precipi-

tate a bloody battle. Three Two B cowboys sat their horses at the fringe of the crowd. Five sheepmen were present, and perhaps eight or nine homesteaders. All were fully armed, and none of the three groups were friendly to each other. However, the sheepmen did have one interest in common with the cattlemen. Neither wanted fences, or any infringement on free and open range.

"I'm ready," Junior Brodie said bluntly. "What are we waiting for?"

Brannigan moved forward lightly on the thin soles of his riding boots. He moved like a man with a definite purpose. But instead of removing his black Stetson, he settled the hat more firmly.

Junior moved out to meet him, and the two men stopped about six feet apart. They sized each other up like trained fighting dogs watching for an opening.

Buff Brodie said suddenly: "Take him, Junior!"

YOUNG Brodie shifted his feet and jabbed with a stiff left arm. He followed through with a whistling right cross, but Brannigan had ducked and sidestepped at the same time. With Junior off-balance, Brannigan jabbed a one-two to the head.

Junior stiffened and sat down with a thudding jolt. He rolled to the side, protecting his face, leaped to his feet, and rushed Brannigan with both fists swinging savage haymakers.

Brannigan caught both blows on his forearms. Then he hooked with his left to set young Brodie up. He followed with a straight right from the shoulder which caught Junior squarely on the point of the chin. Brannigan stepped aside as Junior crashed forward to measure his length.

For a moment there was a stunned si-silence. Then Buff Brodie bellowed like a range bull as he charged at Brannigan. Brannigan's right hand instinctively dropped to his holstered gun, just as a horse spurted between the two men.

"Stop it, Father," a girl's voice screamed. "Don't shoot, Mr. Brannigan!"

Buff Brodie ran into the horse in his blind anger. Brannigan left his six-shooter in leather, as he stared at the girl on the bay horse.

Buff Brodie caught his balance and controlled his temper at the same time. And Junior Brodie sat up, shaking his head.

Brannigan's eyes were on the beautiful girl. She had coal-black hair and eyes, and she was staring intently at Brannigan as if to read his brands and ear-markings. After a moment she said:

"I am Sharon Brodie!"

"Was it a fair fight, Miss Sharon?" Brannigan asked politely.

"It was, and it was short and sweet," she answered bitterly. "Junior didn't have a chance against you, and you knew it!"

Brannigan nodded. "So?"

"I'll handle this, Sharon!" Buff Brodie said.

"Brad Cosper is dead," she said. "Junior has been soundly thrashed, and you might have been killed. Is there not some way to compromise your differences with these people?"

"You go home!" Buff Brodie roared. "There's only one way to compromise with a bunch of nesters, and by dogies, we'll take it!"

"Is that a declaration of war?" Brannigan asked.

"You started this war!" Brodie shouted. "We stockmen will finish it!"

"Self preservation is the first law of life," Brannigan said coldly. "Now that we know where we stand, that clears the air some. Terrapin Creek is deadline, and that goes for all you stockmen!"

"That's what you think!" Buff Brodie said savagely. "No man tells Buff Brodie where he can range his cattle. This has always been open range, and it always will be!"

"It's free range on the other side of the creek," Brannigan repeated. "You stay over on that side, and there won't be any trouble."

"Let's go home, Father!" Sharon Brodie pleaded.

Buff Brodie surprised Brannigan when he nodded. Jud Cummings came out of the store with a 2 B cowboy carrying

the body of Brad Cosper which they laid face-down across his empty saddle.

JUNIOR BRODIE swayed as he got to his feet, walked to his horse and mounted stiffly. He turned and said thickly:

"We'll be seein' you, Brannigan!"

Brannigan made no answer. He was watching Sharon Brodie, and he touched the brim of his hat with the fingers of his left hand.

"Good night, ma'am," he mumured.

She nipped her bay with a blunted spur and rocketed away in the darkness.

The five sheepmen rode away, and the homesteaders were alone on the battlefield. Sam Carlson paid George Fairtree, and stared at the money left in his hand.

"Jasper Jenkins didn't stay to collect," he said heavily.

A horse loomed up out of the darkness, and a voice said quietly:

"I'll take my money."

Jasper Jenkins rode up to Carlson, took the money, stuffed it carelessly into a hip pocket, and rode away without speaking again.

Brannigan shrugged and climbed into his saddle. "Good night, men," he said. "See you in the morning. . . ."

A week after that fight outside Carlson's store, Terrapin Valley was noisy with the ring of axes, the boom of black powder and the tramp of hoofs. The reservoir was almost completed.

Post-oak had been cut for new fences, and a double row of peeled posts and barbed wire surrounded the homestead claims fronting the creek. The nightly patrols had been maintained, but the threats of the stockmen had not materialized.

Six teams of heavy draft horses were working on Brannigan's land, dredging, and throwing up dirt walls for the big tank which would catch the overflow from the reservoir. It was the middle of May, and the hay and grain crops were beginning to head up.

Brannigan had moved his well rig to the

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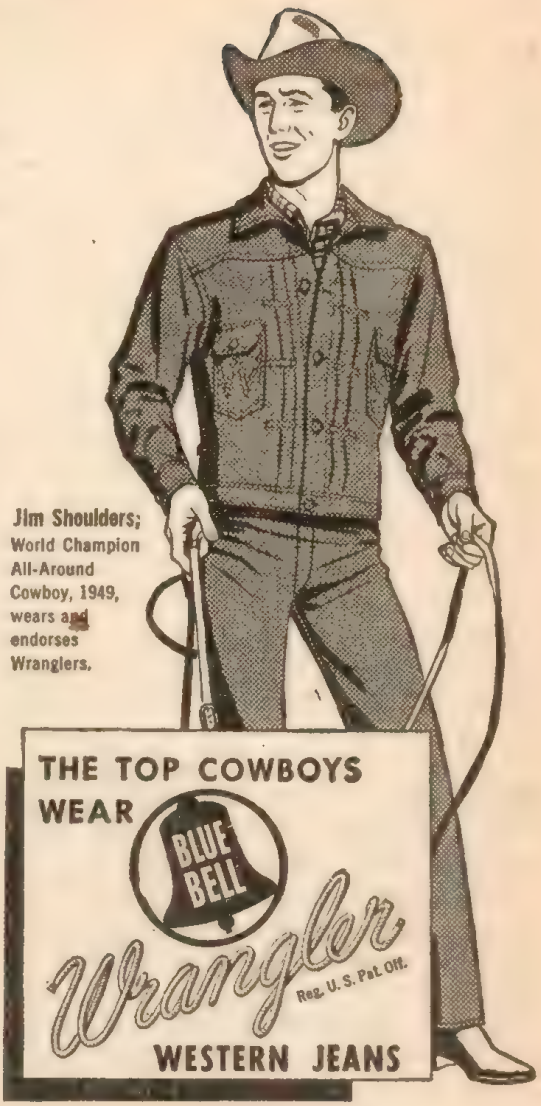
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middle of the reservoir, and was about ready to start drilling. The donkey engine stood on a footing of piled posts, and Brannigan had studied the wheels and pulleys until he was thoroughly familiar with the working parts. A great pile of seasoned roots was piled near the fire-box for fuel.

John Fairtree worked with Brannigan, getting the drills ready. Young Clint's wound had healed, and he was showing a keen interest in the preparations.

"How long do you think we'll be drilling?" Fairtree asked Brannigan.

"Ten days, maybe two weeks," Brannigan answered. "Ben McCullough told me he struck water all through here at less than fifty feet. I figure to go down at least two hundred, and we should get a gravity flow."

"Things have been too quiet," Fairtree said thoughtfully. "Buff Brodie is up to something, and I wish we knew what it is."

"Meanwhile, we've made progress," Brannigan answered philosophically. "We'll fire up the boiler after dinner, and see how the engine works."

All the homesteaders were working hard. George Fairtree was making ditches and laying pipe from the reservoir to the huge earthern tank. Clyde Ferris and Wilhelm Mueller were doing the same at the south end of the reservoir, shaping a ditch three feet deep, which would lead the water from a spillway to the other homesteads.

After dinner, Gustaf Pederson, who had been on guard duty, spoke gravely to Brannigan who was rolling a cigarette, outside the kitchen near the windmill.

"There's sheep grazing about six miles to the east, Brannigan," the young Swede reported. "They are drifting this way. Must be about five thousand head."

Brannigan blew out a cloud of smoke. "The creek bends south about three miles east," he remarked. "They'll probably stop there."

"The ford is three miles east," John Fairtree broke in to say. "The grass is short over that way, and our hay is up two feet."

"We've scraped and harrowed a fire-break around the grain," Terry Sullivan said musingly. "About a hundred yards wide, and running all around our holdings."

"That would stop fire," Joe Ferguson grunted. "It wouldn't stop hungry sheep!"

THE faces of all the men were grave as they considered the possibilities that might be facing them.

"There's cattle grazing south toward the creek," Gustaf Pederson said. "Not more than two miles to the north, and drifting toward water."

Brannigan's face was hard. The prairie hay was drying under the hot sun out on the open range. The land was already brown and dry, although the forage and browse were sufficient for the grazing herds of catle and sheep. But the growing crops on the fenced homesteads were like gleaming green gems in a setting of pale gold. Barley, oats, and corn—and hungry animals did not recognize the boundaries of ownership.

"If they cross the creek," Brannigan said, "we'll turn them back."

"And what if they won't turn?" Claude Brewster asked.

"Then we'll turn 'em," said Brannigan.

"An attack on two fronts," Ferris declared. "That would divide our forces."

"It looks like war to me!" Ferguson pointed out.

"If it come to fighting, we can fall back to those patches of timber for cover," John Fairtree suggested.

"Two men will ride along the east front while two patrol the north on this side of the creek," Brannigan said, after a moment's thought. "I was going to start drilling this afternoon, but it can wait. We'll double the guard tonight. Now let's get back to work while we can."

George Fairtree was one of the guards who patrolled the creek toward the north. His companion was Clyde Ferris, while Brannigan rode along the east with Clint Fairtree. Clint's two dogs trotted behind his horse as they rode away from the settlement. When they were well away

Brannigan said confidently:

"There won't be any shooting this time, Clint. Brodie and Jasper Jenkins have had their heads together, and they just want to make trouble. What would you do in a case like this?"

"I'd take war to them," Clint declared angrily. "I'd get them sheep to running until their tongues hung out!"

"We might do just that," Brannigan agreed, and suddenly reined in his horse. "Look yonder! Those sheep can't be more than a mile away."

"Which means," Clint agreed, "they've crossed the creek at the ford!"

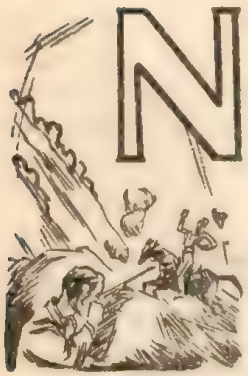
Brannigan stood up in his stirrups, scanning the skyline. His lips trapped together as he saw cattle etched against the turquoise sky. But they had not yet crossed Terrapin Creek.

"It's time to try that plan we worked out, Clint," he smiled.

"You take old Blue," Clint said, "and I'll take Brindle. They'll know what to do."

CHAPTER VIII

Two Sides Can Play



NODDING, Brannigan called to the big brindle dog. He rode toward the north with the dog at the heels of his horse. Clint rode south with the other dog, and they stopped a quarter of a mile apart. Then they started east at a lope, riding to meet the still slowly-grazing sheep.

Behind the flocks were sheepherders, each with a dog. Some of the sheep were still on the east side of the shallow ford, playing "Follow the leader."

Brannigan gave a sign to Clint with his hand over his head. Then both spoke to their dogs.

"Turn 'em back, Blue!"

"Run 'em back, Brindle!"

As the two dogs started toward the sheep, Brannigan and Clint rode at a gallop with their ropes swinging, and shouted loudly. The sheep, startled, began to turn. The two Fairtree dogs ran barking among them, and the vanguard abruptly headed back for the ford, the others in a moment following blindly.

The swarming sheep made a great U turn as the Fairtree dogs kept the leaders moving. They splashed across the creek, and Brannigan and Clint stopped their horses and called to the two dogs. When Old Blue and Brindle turned, Brannigan and Clint waved far out to the side, and made a circling motion to the left.

Barking, the two dogs began to turn the sheep toward the west, but on the far side of the creek. Both sheep dogs worked behind the flock, obeying arm signals.

A rifle shot barked spitefully as the two sheepherders opened fire from a distance. A bullet kicked up dirt ten yards in front of Brannigan's Morgan horse. He reached for his own rifle and squeezed off a shot. His slug cut the dirt under a sheepherder's horse, then Brannigan and Clint were galloping toward the herders.

The sheepmen fled in panic as Brannigan sent bullets cutting the dirt around them.

Brannigan reined in his horse, and rode to meet young Fairtree.

"We'll get back across the creek," Brannigan said. "Call the dogs!"

Clint rode back to the ford, whistled shrilly, and Old Blue and Brindle reluctantly left the chase. The two regular sheep dogs kept the flock moving, and Brannigan smiled grimly as he waved his arm in a sweeping gesture and the Jenkins' trained dog turned the flock to the north. Clint Fairtree chuckled as the billowing waves of dirty white bodies ran on to meet the Two B cattle.

"That'll give Buff Brodie's crew something to do," he said grimly. "They were going to sweep in on us, but they didn't mean for their critters to tangle!"

They rode on and when they reached the wide strip of prairie between the settlement and Terrapin Creek, they met

George Fairtree and Clyde Ferris. Ferris handed a pair of old field-glasses to Brannigan.

"Take my glasses and have a look," he invited excitedly. "A whopping big flock of sheep is mixing up with Buff Brodie's cattle!"

Brannigan took the glasses and saw sheep and cattle milling in wild confusion, while three cowboys vainly tried to keep the herd from turning.

"That should keep all hands busy for a time," he remarked. "And I just might stir up something between Jasper Jenkins and old Buff Brodie."

"You and Clint had something to do with that stampede," George Fairtree accused bluntly. "Clint has spent a heap of his spare time training old Brindle and Blue to obey arm signals."

"Guilty as charged," Brannigan admitted. "It gives me time to start drilling, so I better be getting at it."

After he and Clint had ridden to the Circle F barn and stripped their riding gear, they went directly to the well rig where John Fairtree was firing the boiler of the donkey engine. Clint told his father about the stampede, while Brannigan watched the steam gauges and made adjustments.

The string of tools was in place, and Brannigan tested the throttle. Clint stoked the firebox to keep up a head of steam, and the drilling started. The wheels began to grind on their compensating gears, and the dresed tools began biting into the sandy loam.

BRANNIGAN had about forty feet of penetration before twilight called an end to activities. The sand was already showing traces of moisture, and most of the homesteaders had gathered at the well rig to watch progress.

Brannigan opened his steam valves, said they would call it a day, but would start again at daybreak the next morning.

"We'll double the guard tonight," he said to John Fairtree. "I'll stand first trick with the men."

During the evening meal, John Fairtree noticed Brannigan's preoccupation.

"What do you expect tonight, Brannigan?" he asked matter-of-factly.

"Right now, the most important thing in the settlement is my blacksmith shop and forge," Brannigan answered directly. "We'll need it to keep our tools dressed. Clyde Ferris and his son Carter will sleep in the shop, and I believe I'll bunk down there with 'em tonight, after my watch of duty."

"But you will need some rest," Ma Fairtree objected. "You've worked harder than any two men in the settlement!"

"I like work," Brannigan said tonelessly. "That was a mighty fine meal, Ma."

"Don't change the subject," Ma said sternly. "We need you, Brannigan." She sighed. "It seems so stiff to be calling you by just your last name."

Brannigan smiled without mirth. "I wouldn't want anyone calling me by my first name. Do you mind too much, Ma?"

"It's your own affair," she said with a sniff.

"Maybe it's Percy or Algernon," Clint said.

"Percy or Algernon I could stand," Brannigan answered. "Just call me Brannigon."

He rolled and lighted a quirly. John Fairtree, tired, dozed in his big chair. When Brannigan finished his smoke, he left to stand the first trick of guard duty. He met Terry Sullivan who remarked that there would be a late sickle moon after midnight.

"Be sure of your target before you shoot at anything," Brannigan warned. "And don't forget the password for tonight."

Brannigan went on to his own homestead. He felt grateful anew to these men who had accepted him as one of themselves, without asking any questions about his past.

He stopped to speak with young Frank Ferris who was on the first watch along the creek.

"Everything is quiet, Brannigan," Frank reported. "But they might rush us after dark."

"If shooting starts," Brannigan advised,

"belly down on the ground, and watch the skyline!"

Brannigan went on to his blacksmith shop. He stopped instantly when a voice barked at him:

"Who is it?"

"Deep Water!" Brannigan gave the password. "Brannigan."

Carter Ferris greeted him, and his father spoke from the darkness back by the forge.

"Everything is quiet so far," Clyde Ferris said. "I look to see Buff Brodie ride down here tomorrow."

"So do I," Brannigan agreed. "But we might have visitors tonight. When Brad Cosper rode down here and killed Carl Gary, there was another man with him. Who was he?"

"George Fairtree said he was a stranger," Ferris answered. "But he'd know now how to get into the place."

"Keep a sharp watch, and I'll be back after my trick of sentry-go." Brannigan left the blacksmith shop.

He walked the fence in the darkness until he met Sullivan at the east end. Then he started back to patrol to the west border where young Mike Sullivan was keeping watch. But after an hour had passed, he had found no sign of young Mike.

He was moving on when he stumbled over something in the dark. He heard a muffled groan.

Groping with his left hand, Brannigan touched a body, then his fingers found a hard-twist rope. He also found a bandanna neckerchief in the bound man's mouth, and tore it loose.

"Quiet!" he warned. "Is that you, Mike?"

"Yeah, Mike," came in a hoarse whisper. "I was—clubbed over the head. Don't know how long ago!"

Brannigan fumbled and untied the tight knot of a lariat. He told Mike to stay where he was until his head cleared, and to shoot at anything that moved outside the fence toward the creek.

"I'm going to the blacksmith shop," he whispered.

KEEPING low, Brannigan moved swiftly along the narrow passage between the fences. He crept between the lower strands of the inner fence when he came to his own land. He could see the outlines of the big earthen tank, and the blacksmith shop would be between him and the tank. And as he crept forward, he saw the flash of a gun, followed by the roar of a six-shooter. Another blast followed, and Brannigan's six-shooter leaped to his hand as he sped forward.

A man ran out from the shop, firing as he backed hurriedly away. Brannigan's voice barked sharply:

"Who's there?"

His answer was a roaring shot which whistled past his head. Brannigan fired, and the man screamed as he went backward to the ground.

"Who's out there?" Clyde Ferris called sharply.

"Deep Water!" Brannigan shouted. "Brannigan! I'm coming in, Clyde. Hold your fire!"

He reached the door and was guided inside by a clutching hand. "They got Carter," Ferris whispered, hoarsely, "but I got the gunman who did it. Can we make a light?"

"Close the door," Brannigan said. "Are you sure the killer is dead?"

"I got him twice to make sure," Ferris answered grimly. "How about his pard who ran out the door?"

"He's lying out there," Brannigan said tightly. "He won't give us any more trouble."

He struck a match with his thumb nail. Young Carter Ferris was sitting up, holding his right shoulder. He was swaying slightly, but his voice was calm.

"Broke my arm or shoulder," he said. "Did you get the son, Dad?"

"Yonder he lays." Clyde Ferris pointed to the dead man. "Brannigan, they sneaked up on us before we knew it. Wonder how they got by the guards?"

"They slugged Mike Sullivan," Brannigan said. "They came down here to wreck the shop, of course. Chances are they were going to set the place on fire. Must

have left their horses on the other side of the creek. You look after Carter, and I'll send a couple of men to relieve him and Mike. Shoot at anybody that don't give the password!"

Brannigan was stopped twice as he made his way across his land. The homesteaders had heard the shooting, and were excited. Brannigan hurried to the Fairtree house, telling two men to follow him.

Olaf Pederson and his son Gustaf were there, talking to Claude Brewster and George Fairtree. Brannigan told what had happened, and assigned George and Olaf to relieve Mike Sullivan and Carter Ferris. Brewster asked Brannigan when he was going to sleep.

"Come winter," Brannigan answered shortly. "The rest of you turn in and get what sleep you can. I look for company in the morning, and we want to be ready for 'em!"

He left with George Fairtree and Olaf Pederson, and when they got back to the blacksmith shop Brannigan told George to look at the dead man.

"That's him!" Fairtree exclaimed. "That's the hombre who was here with Brad Cosper!"

"Drag him outside with the other one," Brannigan growled. "Olaf, you go and relieve Mike."

"Maybe that one out in the yard is only wounded," George Fairtree said.

Brannigan smiled grimly. "I had him skylined. You'll find him shot through the heart."

He asked young Ferris if he could walk. Carter said that he could. His father had applied a tourniquet.

"Let's get back to the Circle F," Brannigan said.

Back in the big Fairtree house, Ma Fairtree had hot water ready, and clean cloths laid out. Brannigan washed his hands, examined the wound, and shook his head.

"That slug broke the bone, Carter," he said gently. "We'll have to splint it, and clean out the wound. You reckon you can take it?"

"Fly at it." Carter's jaw firmed. "I might yell and kick up a fuss, but pay me no mind. I'm glad Dad got that sneaking killer!"

"I'll shape out a pair of splints while you get him ready," Carter's father muttered. "We'll like as not have to hold him down, but me and John can do it!"

BRANNIGAN slit the left sleeve of Carter's shirt, and Ma Fairtree washed the wound. John Fairtree came from his room with a glass and bottle.

"Take a good draught of this brandy, Carter," he said, and poured liquor into the glass.

Carter drank the fiery brandy and leaned back.

"I'm ready," he sighed.

Brannigan had his first-aid kit ready.

He cleansed the wound with a solution of permanganate, probed deftly, and applied a dressing to the wound. Ma Fairtree spread a comforter on the floor, and they helped Carter to lie down.

Clyde Ferris measured his splints. Ma Fairtree had found some clean cotton batting with which to line the rough splints. Brannigan motioned with his head for John Fairtree and Clyde Ferris to get ready.

Fairtree sat down on the patient's legs, facing Carter's head. Clyde Ferris took a firm grip on his son's right arm, and Ma Fairtree placed the bottom splint into position as Brannigan raised the left arm.

Carter locked his jaws stubbornly. Brannigan reached for the upper splint.

"This will hurt like hell," he said. "But only for a minute or so. I've got to straighten the break, so bite down on your teeth!"

"Pay no mind to my bellering!" young Ferris gasped.

Brannigan placed his hands above and below the break, began a slow pull. Carter gave a stifled scream, and went limp.

"He's fainted," Brannigan whispered. "I'll get this done before he comes to!"

His hands moved deftly and surely as he found the break and set the bones. Ma Fairtree tried to keep the tears from her eyes as she began the bandaging under Brannigan's guidance.

When that was completed the three men carried Carter to the room Brannigan shared with Clint, undressed him and placed him in Brannigan's bed. Carter Ferris opened his eyes.

"Is it done?" he whispered hoarsely.

"All finished, Carter," Brannigan assured him. "And you've got plenty nerve. You'll have to lie quiet for ten days at least. You go moving around, the bones won't knit right."

"Thanks for everything, Brannigan," Carter murmured.

"I'll sit with him," Ma Fairtree said. "Was Mike Sullivan hurt much?"

"He'll have a bad headache," Brannigan said with a shrug.

When he went out to the kitchen Claude Brewster came in with Mike, and Fairtree poured a glass of brandy for young Sullivan.

"Slapped me to sleep, is all," Mike muttered. "But I'll even the score with that Two B outfit before this ruckus is over!"

"What's the plan if Brodie comes faunching down here in the mornin'?" Brewster asked.

Brannigan studied the faces of the four men. His eyes lingered longest on the weathered countenance of John Fairtree.

"We will speak him fair," Brannigan finally said. "Up to now the losses on Brodie's side have all been hired killers. But he knows now we will fight, and fight

[*Turn page*]

UNCLE WALTER

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to the finish."

Clyde Ferris, short and stocky, a transplanted Britisher of the old school, squared his shoulders and thrust out his chin.

"With me, the issue is personal!" he declared bluntly. "My son might have been killed, and Buff Brodie sent those two gunswifts down here!"

"You'd draw the lightning if you made it personal," Claude Brewster said thoughtfully. "After all, those two men were after Brannigan. They meant to destroy his blacksmith shop, and maybe him as well!"

"Bringing the deep well in is the most important thing for the whole settlement," Brannigan said. "After that, what happened to any one of us would not ruin all the rest. . . . Now I'll get down to the shop." He left the house with a springy step.

Brannigan made his way across the big yard, speaking occasionally to one of the alert guards. When he reached the blacksmith shop he gave the password to George Fairtree, and went in. Something moist touched Brannigan's hand, and he scratched the head of the Fairtree dog, old Blue.

"With Blue on guard, we can get some sleep," George suggested. "Did you get Carter's arm set?"

"It's all splinted," Brannigan answered, and now his deep voice held a note of weariness. "I'll go to bed 'standing up' tonight." He pulled off his boots and removed his black Stetson. "See you at daybreak, George."

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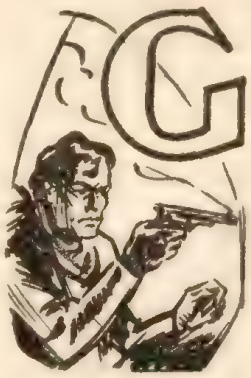
CHAPTER IX

Stalemate



GEORGE FAIRTREE opened his eyes drowsily when the first rays of an early sun tugged at his eyelids. He threw off the heavy quilt and called to Brannigan then saw him and the dog out in the big yard.

Fairtree pulled on his boots and went out into the yard. Brannigan was standing beside the tarp-covered body of the man who had run from the blacksmith shop after shooting Carter Ferris. George himself had helped place the other dead man a short distance away.

"Do you know him?" George asked.

"Never saw him before." Brannigan shrugged. "But he's got five notches whittled on the handle of his gun, and a slug through the heart!"

George raised a corner of the tarpaulin to look at the dead man's face.

"Stranger to me," he said. "Let's get over to the Circle F for some grub."

Brannigan fell in beside big George. At the Fairtree house the night guard had gathered, most of them showing the effects of a sleepless night. Terry Sullivan voiced a complaint.

"You look fresh as a daisy, Brannigan. Didn't you lose any sleep to speak of?"

"Not much, so why speak of it?" Brannigan countered. A hard smile curved the corners of his lips. "We didn't know the dead man out in the yard," he told the men. "He had five notches whittled on the handle of his meat-gun!"

Brannigan walked into the kitchen and took his place at the long table. He knew that Ma Fairtree had been up all night with young Ferris, but she was still able to smile as she placed a heaping plate of hot cakes before Brannigan.

"Use plenty of black-strap and butter," she urged, and whispered proudly: "I

slept four hours."

Brannigan ate heartily, finished off with steaming cowboy coffee, and was the first to leave the table. He left the house and hurried to the well rig, started a fire under the boiler, and inspected the drills while he was getting up steam. Then he walked around inside the huge depression which had once been a little hill of rocks and aged roots.

A dirt fill had been made for the walls, with stone blocks at the top for the upper courses. These had been laid with mortar made from cement brought all the way from Germany. The reservoir would measure two hundred yards across by inside measurements, with sloping walls another fifty feet thick.

As Brannigan tested his steam, the homesteaders were driving up to complete the work on the big earthen tank on his own land. Clint came down to help, and they soon had the drill working.

John Fairtree came hurriedly across the yard, and Brannigan sensed that something had upset the big homesteader. Fairtree came directly to Brannigan and spoke urgently.

"Better let off the steam and let the fire die. Buff Brodie is riding in with quite a party!"

Brannigan told Clint to quit firing the boiler. He stopped the engine and opened his steam valves.

"How many in the party?" he asked.

"Six or seven," Fairtree told him. "They don't seem to be in a hurry."

Brannigan turned to Clint. "Get over to the tank and tell Claude Brewster and George to come over," he ordered. "Bring Clyde Ferris and Terry Sullivan, and tell the other men to stay with the work!"

As the engine ceased to clatter, the hissing of steam had stopped, and cattle could be heard lowing in the big feed yard. Brannigan straightened his wide shoulders.

"Let's get over to my house," he said.

When they reached the house, Brannigan mounted his horse and rode to the big front gate which stood open to admit the teams of the homesteaders.

Barbed wire stretched north and south to protect the growing grain from sheep and cattle, so the adjoining homesteads made a decided contrast to the browning browse of the parched prairie. The green fields of tall grain showed the productiveness of the virgin soil, and the solid buildings spoke of permanence.

Brannigan looked upon it and found it good. Little ridges of muscle set along the lean lines of his jaw as he watched the oncoming riders.

THE CATTLEMAN and his son were easy to pick out, as was also the big bulk of Jud Cummings. Two other riders were evidently Two B cowboys, but the sixth man puzzled Brannigan. He was tall and slender, and carried himself with an air of authority. As he rode closer, Brannigan saw white hair under a gray Stetson. He also caught the sheen of metal on the man's vest. Brannigan's eyes narrowed.

"Looks like Brodie is bringing the law with him," Claude Brewster remarked. "He'd be a U. S. marshal."

Brannigan made no answer. He was studying the lawman's stern face. He guessed the man to be about fifty-five. A white, closely clipped mustache emphasized a long straight nose, and a pair of piercing gray eyes under white shaggy brows.

The party rode up to the gate and reined to a stop. The marshal addressed John Fairtree.

"Is there a man by the name of Brannigan here?"

"Present," Brannigan answered shortly.

"Brodie's hired killers missed Brannigan last night," Clyde Ferris drawled. "So he's still here."

"I'm U.S. Marshal Jeff Morrow," the lawman introduced himself. "I want Brannigan for killing Brad Cosper!"

"It was self-defense," Ferris interrupted. "There were a dozen witnesses!"

"Which you can produce in court," the marshal said.

"Cosper was wanted by the law in seven states," Brannigan declared. "He was also

wanted right here for killing Carl Gary!"

"Which the courts will decide," Buff Brodie said grimly. "Brannigan will get a fair trial."

"Sorry, but I'm not going," Brannigan said flatly. "I'll be here when the law wants me, but right now I have work to do."

"Will you swear to the warrant?" the marshal asked Brodie.

"That I will, Marshal," Brodie agreed promptly.

"I have no other course," Morrow said sternly. "You are under arrest, Brannigan!"

"I demand a trial right here where the offense took place!" Brannigan said firmly.

John Fairtree stepped forward. "I'll sign a complaint against Buff Brodie," he stated clearly. "For complicity in a killing, and for attempted destruction of private property!"

"For which I'll post bail," Brodie answered coolly. "You can't post bail for killing!"

"Just a moment," Claude Brewster put in. "I'm still a practicing attorney. The most you can charge Brannigan with is manslaughter, and he can prove self-defense. Am I right, Marshal?"

Jeff Morrow rubbed his chin. "You've got a point there, Counselor," he agreed. "Looks to me like another stalemate, Brodie."

Buff Brodie's face flushed with anger. His hand hovered close to the grips of his six-shooter until he saw Brannigan regarding him with a little smile twisting the corners of his hard mouth.

"You can't prove I sent Pearson and Tuttle down here last night!" Brodie shouted.

"Thanks," Brannigan murmured. "We didn't know their names!"

Buff Brodie glared at the homesteaders.

"Something I should know about?" Marshal Morrow asked John Fairtree swiftly.

"Two men got through our lines last night," Fairtree explained. "One of 'em shot one of our boys pretty bad, but the gent that done it was killed. The other one made a run for it just as Brannigan came up, and Brannigan didn't miss. They were trying to burn down Brannigan's blacksmith shop."

"What's this got to do with Brodie?" the marshal asked.

"One of the gun gents was Brad Cosper's saddle pard," Fairtree answered. "He was on the Gary place when Cosper killed Carl Gary. Not only that, but the Brodies rode down with Cosper the night Cosper tried to kill Brannigan in a fair fight. They were all drawing Brodie's pay!"

Marshal Morrow turned to Buff Brodie. "The law don't take sides here in the Territory," he said sternly. "Do you want to withdraw that complaint against Brannigan, or go over to Fort Smith with him to stand trial?"

"Tear the papers up," Brodie growled. "I'll fight it from now on in my own way." He looked down at the ground. "Could you take Brannigan for a killing up in Oregon?"

"With the proper warrant," Morrow said.

"He killed Cosper's brother up there over a land squabble," Brodie accused.

BRANNIGAN stared at the cowman with a tight little smile curling his lips.

"You have proof of this?" he asked.

"I had Brad Cosper's word for it!" Brodie shouted.

"I was acquitted," Brannigan said easily. "The jury brought in a verdict of self-defense. You can look up the records, Marshal."

"You don't seem to have much luck," Morrow told Brodie. "It looks to me like you'll have to stay on your own graze, and let the homesteaders stay on theirs."

"I told you we were wastin' our time, Dad," Junior Brodie sneered.

"That's right," George Fairtree agreed. "Time you could have spent to better advantage by separatin' your cattle from Jasper Jenkins' sheep. Marshal, I saw the tangle through field glasses. It looked like the sheep were going to hit us from the

east, and Brodie's cattle from the north. But the sheep turned west at the creek and met the cattle comin' down to crash our fences."

Buff Brodie's face turned purple with anger. Words refused to form for the infuriated cattleman.

"I don't like fences!" he finally shouted. "I was here first, and I'll be here last!"

"Sure you will," Brannigan agreed. "On your own side of the creek. There's room enough for a dozen big spreads over there, but the time has come when you'll have to buy the land. Am I right, Marshal Morrow?"

"I'm a free-graze man, but it looks like you're right, Brannigan," Morrow agreed. "You better be gettin' back to your own graze, Brodie."

"Rider coming hell-for-leather from the east," Brannigan said quietly. "Looks like a sheepherder, but it could be a Two B rider."

"Are you letting on that a Two B cowboy looks like a sheepwalker?" one of the Two B men asked harshly.

"That one does," Brannigan answered guilelessly.

The cowboy slapped for his holstered pistol. He stopped with a startled grunt when he looked into the barrel of Brannigan's leaping six-shooter.

"Don't try that again, waddy," Brannigan warned.

Marshal Morrow smiled, grim-lipped, as he turned to watch the approaching rider.

"It's Jim Jenkins, Jasper's younger brother," John Fairtree identified. "Looks like he's been in a ruckus."

Jim Jenkins raced up and slid his horse to a stop. His face was scratched and bruised, his clothing torn and soiled, and his flapping holster was empty.

"Marshal," he shouted, "I demand some law in these parts! I was roped and dragged out of my saddle by a Two B cowhand while his pards kept me under their guns!"

"Where did this all happen?" Morrow asked.

"Other side of the creek," Jenkins barked. "Forty head of our sheep were shot and killed!"

"Keep them woolies on your own graze," Buff Brodie interrupted coldly. "They might have ticks, and I'm taking no chances on tick fever!"

"You keep your cows on your own graze!" Jenkins shouted at Brodie. "They're wandering all over our grass, except those that are dead!"

Buff Brodie's smile froze on his ruddy face.

"You telling me you killed some of my cattle?" he bawled.

"Somebody did," Jenkins said with a twisted grin. "Every time a Two B cowboy shot a sheep, one of our herders shot a Two B cow!"

"Sounds fair enough to me," Morrow said. "Just a neighbors' quarrel, and seems to me the country is big enough for all."

"Meaning you're havin' no part of it?" Brodie asked.

"I don't settle boundary disputes, or arbitrate differences," Jeff Morrow said. "If anybody wants to sign a complaint, I'll do my duty as I see it!"

"Thanks for nothing at all," Buff Brodie said gruffly. "We'll take care of our own troubles, and if we can't expect any help from the law, we don't want any interference!"

"Looks to me like the old order is about due to pass, Brodie," Morrow observed. "You'll have to buy land, instead of just claiming all you can see. Too many people are comin' to the Territory to stay!"

"You boys ride across the creek and help cut out our stock," Brodie ordered his cowboys. "Junior and I will be along shortly."

"There's nothing to keep you from going now," John Fairtree observed.

"There's plenty to keep me here," Buff Brodie said bluntly. "You can't take the water out of Terrapin Creek! You've got to stop that drilling! A deep well would drain from the creek, and put all the water on your land!"

"Nuh-uh," Brannigan interrupted. "Terrapin Creek is surface water. We won't

have to touch a drop of it."

"I'll take it to court!" Brodie shouted. "I'll law you from here to who hid the broom!"

Brannigan nodded. "Right," he agreed. "Let's settle our differences in a court of law."

CHAPTER X

There She Blows!

WHEN the Two B cowboys had ridden away, Brodie, glaring at Brannigan, jerked his head at Junior and whirled his horse. The two raced across the prairie.

Jeff Morrow spoke to Jim Jenkins.

"You wanted to sign a complaint?" he asked politely, but his keen eyes stabbed at Jenkins and had an answer even before the sheepman spoke.

"I'll ride home to see Jasper," Jim Jenkins muttered. "He'll have something to say about draining Terrapin Creek."

He rode away in the opposite direction from the Two B men.

"What about this water?" Morrow asked Brannigan. "*Will* you drain from the creek with your deep well?"

Brannigan shook his head. "You've seen it rain in these parts in the winter, Marshal," he answered. "What becomes of the run-off during floodtime?"

"I wish I knew," Morrow answered honestly. "I've also seen this country during a long drought."

"That run-off sinks into the ground," Brannigan said. "It's as free as the air, if a man will go to some trouble to reclaim it. That's what we aim to do, on our own land!"

"Good luck, and you'll need it," Morrow said earnestly. "Chances are I won't get down this way again for several months, and I'm asking you fellows to keep within the law." He reined his horse about, and with a wave of his hand, rode off.

John Fairtree suggested that they get back to work.

"I'm going to ride the fence-line for about an hour," Brannigan said. "You get the fire up in the boiler, Clint."

He sent his horse toward the creek, and tied up in a bosque of scrubby post-oak on a little knoll. Lifting his rifle from the scabbard, he levered a shell into the breech, and hunkered down on his boot heels.

A rider was coming toward the creek on Two B graze. Brannigan could recognize any rider he knew from the way that person sat saddle, and this rider was a woman. Although he had seen her but once, Brannigan recognized Sharon Brodie.

But Brannigan had seen something which had evidently escaped the eyes of the girl. Another rider was keeping her in sight, and also keeping to the alders and brush along the creek on the far side. His high-peaked sombrero marked him for a Mexican herder.

Sharon Brodie came on at brisk lope, and from his place of concealment Brannigan studied her, trying to make out what she was doing. Then he saw the high sombrero of her pursuer disappearing in a patch of high brush. Brannigan shifted his rifle to cover the herder.

A flat barking explosion ripped out just before Brannigan squeezed his own trigger. Sharon Brodie's horse made a frantic leap, and crumpled in mid-air. The horse crashed down at the very edge of the bluff, and she catapulted out into space as she instinctively kicked her boots free from the stirrups.

Instantly Brannigan was slipping the smoking rifle back into the saddle scabbard and was in his saddle as the girl hit the brawling creek.

He sent the deep-chested Morgan full tilt into the creek. The horse found no bottom, and began to swim. A cream-colored Stetson floated by, and Brannigan made a grab at a tangle of black hair.

He heaved the girl's head above water, shifted his grip to her shirt collar, and

brought her close to his stirrup. The swimming horse angled downstream to a sand-bar and found a footing.

Brannigan dropped from saddle into knee-deep water. He dragged the girl up on the bar, lifted her in his arms and made his way to the margin of grass to lay her down. He saw a livid bruise on her head where she had evidently struck a rock or floating bit of driftwood. Her eyes were closed, but her heart was beating strongly.

Sharon Brodie was a deep-chested girl, tall and rounded, and beautiful, a magnificent girl of the outdoors. She stirred restlessly, and Brannigan found her eyes open, studying his face. She jerked loose from him, came to her feet, and slapped for her empty holster.

"You shot my horse, nester!" she accused in an angry voice. "So you are making war on women!"

"Stop fighting your head, lady," Brannigan said coldly. "Like as not you hit your head on a chunk, and it addled your brains!"

"My father will kill you for this!" Sharon declared savagely.

"Maybe not," Brannigan drawled. "Simmer down and I'll tell you what happened."

SHARON BRODIE stared at him, her mouth open. She began to tremble, and dropped down on the grass.

"It better be good!" she murmured.

"There's a dead man across the creek in that clump of tules," Brannigan told her. "He was following you, and shot your horse from under you."

Sharon Brodie listened, her dark eyes wide with suspicion. "How do I know you are telling the truth?" she asked.

Brannigan walked to his horse, mounted, and kicked the left stirrup free.

"My horse will carry double across the ford," he said. "We'll ride over and see if you know the dead man!"

Sharon fitted her boot to the proffered stirrup, and swung up behind Brannigan's saddle. The Morgan walked upstream to the ford, crossed, and stopped on the far bank. Sharon Brodie swung down, followed by Brannigan, who ground-tied the horse. Then he led the way into the tules.

"There's your man," he said, and stepped aside.

Sharon stared down at the dark, dead face, and shuddered.

"He was a sheepherder named Rosalio," she murmured. "And there is his horse tied to a creosote bush!"

"Why did he want to make you trouble?" Brannigan asked.

"There was a fight last night," Sharon said. "Junior killed a herder, and Dad wounded another."

"Well," Brannigan said, "if you're all right now, you can take the herder's horse and I'll be getting back to my work."

Sharon gripped his hands. "I'm sorry for what I said, for what I was thinking," she murmured. "And I want to thank you for saving my life." She clung to his hands. "Oh, is there no way to settle this trouble?"

"You might talk to your folks about it," Brannigan suggested. "There's room enough for all, and land is cheap."

Sharon Brodie abruptly pulled him to her, and quickly kissed him on the cheek.

"Thanks again, Brannigan," she said. "Take care of yourself!"

She turned away and walked to the dead man's horse. Mounting, she loped off.

Watching her, Brannigan's hand went to his face and rubbed his cheek where she had kissed him.

"There's no place in my life for a woman," he growled.

Brannigan rode back along the fences which separated the homesteads from Terrapin Creek. He studied the long corridor of land, gauging its possibilities for future development.

"That strip would make a fine feed lot," he murmured. "Must be all of six hundred acres in that strip. I'll have a look into it."

Again he rubbed his cheek. He had traveled fast because he had traveled alone, but now a vague uneasiness beset him, made him restless.

"I'll play my hand out solo!" he mut-

tered angrily. "All I need is work, and I know where to find plenty of it!"

Finally entering the Circle F yard through the big gate he off-saddled and stabled his horse and went to his room to change his soggy boots, passing Ma Fairtree in the kitchen.

"You got your feet wet," she said, then stared at his troubled face. "Something bothering you, Brannigan?"

"Nothing," he answered shortly.

In his room he pulled on dry socks, changed his boots, and tugged his black Stetson down over his eyes. When he went back into the kitchen, Ma Fairtree blocked his way to the door.

"You've helped us more than we can say, Brannigan," she told him earnestly. "Now maybe I can help you. Which one of the girls is it? I didn't know you'd so much as looked at one in the settlement."

"Girls?" Brannigan repeated. "I don't know what you mean!"

"You've met Sharon Brodie!" Ma Fairtree said sagely.

Brannigan's jaw dropped. He looked down into her eyes, then kissed her lightly on the cheek.

"Where did you learn to read sign?" he asked with a smile.

"Then you did meet Sharon?"

"I met her. A sheepherder shot her horse out from under her, and she took a bad fall into the creek."

"Oh-oh!" Ma Fairtree murmured. "Then you hauled her to shore. You had to hold her in your arms, and it is that time of the year!"

"I still don't know what you are talking about," Brannigan said roughly.

"You don't know what *you* are talking about," Ma Fairtree corrected. "But if I can do anything to help you, just let me know."

"I'll do that," Brannigan answered drily. . . .

DURING the week that passed after the United States marshal's visit to the settlement, there were no outward signs of war from either the cattlemen or the sheepmen.

Work had been completed on the big earthen tank which would catch the overflow from the reservoir. Most of the homesteaders had returned to their own holdings, but the nightly patrols had been maintained. Work progressed steadily on the deep well, and Brannigan had kept the heavy drills rising and falling twelve hours a day.

As Brannigan stood on the north wall of the reservoir, looking out over the green fields and the red, sandy loam of the open prairie, John Fairtree came down from the house with his two sons. Clyde Ferris had dressed the tools and he and Olaf Pederson were waiting down at the engine.

"By yiminy, we bring water in today," the big Swede whispered hoarsely to Ferris. "Brannigan says we are about to break through the limestone at the two-hundred-foot level."

Ferris smiled as he indicated some heavy planking running from the donkey engine up to the east wall where an opening would permit removal of the equipment. A runway had been carefully laid, and Clint Fairtree had brought out two of the heavy teams of Percheron horses. Fairtree came down to the engine where Ferris had built up a head of steam.

"We'll drill down about two more feet," Brannigan said. "That sand is getting wetter, and it won't be long now."

Ferris nodded, and started the big wheels. The heavy string of tools was raised to the top of the rig, released with a throttle, and allowed to plunge down into the casing. The rise and fall of the drills continued for an hour, until it was stopped for Brannigan to test the deep sand. Then he told Ferris to draw his fire, and let out the steam.

"You mean we're down?" Ferris asked, excitement in his voice.

"Down as far as we dare go with the rig in place," Brannigan told him. "Let's start dismantling the rig, and John will haul the machinery out."

As the rig was dismantled, Clint hauled the timbers out of the reservoir on a stone-boat built like a flat sled. When Ma

Fairtree struck the steel triangle to call them to dinner, the well rig and engine had been removed and the opening in the east wall filled in with earth and rock. After the top wall had been laid, the huge

THOSE STRANGE BADMEN!

Tom Horn, the Missouri farm boy who won himself a large reputation out West as a cowboy and a gunman, would often admit to things with which, in reality, he had nothing at all to do. He was especially prone to do this when drunk. Eventually, this amusing habit got him into real trouble. Drunk, he admitted the murder of a boy. He was hanged, despite later protestations of his innocence.

★ ★ ★

Billy Grounds, the Arizona killer whose real name was Arthur Burcher, wrote regularly to his mother, giving her a detailed account of all his depredations. He had twenty notches on his gun at the time he was killed—but how proud his mother was of his successful career as a badman is not known.

★ ★ ★

A popular character of early Texas history was Briton Baylie, a settler in the Brazos country. Baylie was one of those Stephen F. Austin sought to evict from his colony as an undesirable character. Baylie refused to leave.

"Haven't you served a term in the Kentucky penitentiary?" Austin demanded.

"Yep," drawled Baylie, "but I served a term in the legislature in penance for it."

Baylie made his peace with Austin, became a captain of Texas militia, and constructed the first brick residence in Austin's colony. He died around 1830, and by the terms of his will was buried standing up, a jug of corn whiskey and his rifle at his feet.

Even in death Brit Baylie didn't want to bend his head before any man.

—*Jackson Cole*

reservoir would be ready to impound the precious water.

Before dinner was over the homesteaders began to arrive, most of them with their wives and families. They talked in subdued tones which told of their inner excitement, and from time to time glanced at the calm face of Brannigan, who was smoking a brown-paper cigarette.

"The dishes can wait," Ma Fairtree said emphatically, as she removed her apron. "We girls want to see the water brought in!"

Brannigan ground out his cigarette under a heel of one boot, and headed for the reservoir.

"You men finish up that last stand of rocks on the top level," he instructed, when all hands had gathered. "I want Clyde Ferris and George Fairtree to help me, but I'll give you all the word before we start the Big Thing!"

He unlocked a heavy shed just outside the high walls and brought out a small wooden cradle he had constructed, with handles on both ends. Ferris and George took the handles as Brannigan explained what was to be done.

"I've got a cylinder of nitroglycerin," he said in a low voice. "I got it from Ben McCullough. I chose you two men because you are both steady, and sure-footed. I'm going to put this cylinder in the cradle, and you carry it careful to the hole. Don't stumble, or we'll all be blown to kingdom come!"

Clyde Ferris nodded gravely. "I've handled the stuff some," he said. "You're not allowed even one mistake with this stuff, so please watch your big feet, George."

John Fairtree went ahead and cleared the way. There was utter silence as the two men slowly carried their burden up the slant, and over the rock wall.

Brannigan walked in front, carrying a long length of heavy fish-line. Willing hands lifted the explosive gently over the rock wall, steadied the cradle while Ferris and George climbed over and resumed their holds. The heavy silence was oppressive as the three men stopped at the deep, gaping hole, and gently placed the cradle on a mound of soft sandy loam.

ALTHOUGH Brannigan had tested the line several times he again tied a stone to one end, and lowered it into the hole. He paid out the line, hand over

hand, checked the knot when the stone touched bottom, then brought the stone up.

"Up-end the cylinder, and hold it steady!" he told George Fairtree and Clyde Ferris. Sweat was pouring from George Fairtree's face. Clyde Ferris was smiling, a cold, twisted smile of restraint. Brannigan made a tie to the handle of the metal cylinder, tested it, and nodded.

"Raise it slow, start it in this top casing, and easy does it," he said clearly. "Clyde, get behind me to double my grip on the line, just in case."

A length of casing had been fastened in place. This would guide the cylinder for the first forty feet. Ferris and Fairtree slowly raised the nitro, placed it in the casing, and held it until Brannigan took all the weight on his line. Then Ferris went behind Brannigan, catching the line firmly as Brannigan lowered the cylinder, and watched the marked line.

Up on the rim, homesteaders watched in fascinated silence. Every eye was fixed on Branigan. A concerted sigh of relief went up as his hands finally came to a stop. He made a tie to hold the loose line, turned to smile at Ferris, then picked up a small metal object that was shaped like a top.

"This is the go-devil," he explained. "I fill it with sand, lower it into the casing, then drop it. When I do, you boys want to take off!"

He fastened a lighter line to the little pointed metal top, after filling it with sand. Then he lowered it into the guide-casing.

"Get set," he said to his helpers. "Here she goes!"

He turned loose the light line, then ran for the higher walls with Ferris and Fairtree making it a race.

A muffled *crack* came to the ears of the straining listeners. It was followed by a louder explosion as the nitroglycerin went off. There was a faint rumbling for seconds, becoming increasingly louder. Suddenly the guide casing was hurled from the mouth of the hole.

"There she blows!" Clyde Ferris yelled.

CHAPTER XI

Land Is Cheap

A BOILING geyser of muddy water shot high into the air. A roar went up from the homesteaders, and Brannigan went over the wall. John Fairtree greeted him with outstretched hand.

"You've done it, Brannigan!" the big homesteader cried heartily. "You've brought in the first deep well in the Territory!"

Brannigan smiled and vised down on the big calloused fingers. He was watching a pool form over the deep hole. The column of water was now spouting perhaps twenty feet into the air.

"*We* brought it in," he corrected gravely. "Every man in the settlement had a hand in the work. I believe we can count on a steady flow."

Now that the work was finished, weariness began to show on Brannigan's strong face, as he stood looking down into the filling reservoir. He turned to look at Terrapin Creek, and John Fairtree followed his gaze.

"Yes, the creek will dry up this year," Fairtree prophesied. "Buff Brodie will claim we emptied it!"

"I'm taking a little trip in the morning, John," Brannigan said. "To the land office over at Tulsa."

Fairtree nodded. "I've noticed you studying that strip between us and the creek. About six hundred acres in that piece, and it would not only protect us in the rear, but would make a good feed lot!"

"That's what I was thinking," Brannigan agreed. "Things have been quiet, and I won't be missed for a few days."

"We'll post a double guard for a few nights," Fairtree promised. "Do you want Clint to ride with you?"

Brannigan shook his head. "I'll ride alone."

He gathered up his hand-tools and locked them in the little shed, then went on to the house to make preparations for his trip. He cleaned his six-shooter and saddle gun and packed a slim bed-roll, alone in the room, for Carter Ferris had been taken home. Then a smile spread over Brannigan's bronzed features.

"I'll have a swim and a bath in the reservoir tonight," he murmured.

It seemed like more than a month since he had ridden into Terrapin Valley where hard labor had furnished an outlet for his pent-up energies. Now he would enjoy the long days in the saddle again.

Ma Fairtree provided a huge supper to celebrate the bringing in of the deep well. But Brannigan was strangely silent, preoccupied.

It was dark when he and Clint walked to the reservoir. Brannigan stripped to the skin, dived into the cool water, and sighed with content. Clint joined him, and they struck out for the western rim of the reservoir.

"Just like the old swimming hole back home!" Brannigan declared.

As they rested on the rocks, Clint begged earnestly: "Take me with you, Brannigan. I can guard your back, in case you need a bit of help!"

Brannigan shook his head. "Not this time, Clint. I want to be alone for a few days. Got to catch up on my thinking."

Clint sighed but said no more as they swam back, dried themselves on huck towels, and resumed their work clothes. Brannigan went early to bed.

Ma Fairtree looked at him sharply when he entered the kitchen early in the morning. He was dressed in the clothing he had worn when he had ridden in to the Circle F, and his six-shooter was on his right leg, with the tie-backs fastened.

"Is it Sharon?" Ma asked softly.

"I haven't seen her since her horse was shot," Brannigan answered, a trifle impatiently. "I've got land on my mind, Ma, is all!"

Ma sniffed, and went on with her cooking. Brannigan poured a cup of hot coffee, rolled and lighted a quirly, and sighed with a feeling of deep content.

"I'll miss your cooking, Ma," he said with a smile.

"Hmm," Ma muttered. "You'll be getting someone else to do your cooking before winter sets in."

John Fairtree came in from the barn, and Clint emerged from his room. There was little talking during breakfast, and when it was over, Brannigan went up behind Ma, circled her with his strong arms and kissed her cheek.

"That's how much I love you, Ma," he said.

"Gwan with you," Ma scolded, but a flush of pleasure was on her cheeks. She looked long into his dark blue eyes. "You'll take care of yourself, Brannigan?" she pleaded. "You'll try to keep out of trouble?"

"Cross my heart," Brannigan assured. "And I'll be back in about a week." He left the kitchen and walked rapidly to the barn.

HIS MORGAN horse was thoroughly rested and eager to be on the move. Brannigan mounted and rode out of the barn. He waved to the Fairtrees, and headed out through the gate.

He walked his horse until he crossed the creek ford, then he lifted his mount to a lope, keeping a close watch as he rode across the prairie to where the Jenkins brothers grazed their sheep. He saw neither sheep nor herders, and at noon he rested his horse at the McCullough place. The run-down ranch seemed even more desolate than before and Brannigan was glad to ride on to the little shipping town of Bass.

Arrived there, Brannigan stabled his horse and ate an early supper in a lunchroom near the station. He took a room in the hotel, turned in early, and was so completely rested when he arose, with his muscles feeling the old buoyancy, that he rode steadily all day.

He camped on the prairie when night overtook him, cooked a simple meal and, after smoking a while, crawled into his blankets. When he cooked his breakfast

the next morning, he frowned as a name persisted in plaguing him.

"Sharon," he murmured. "I wonder what she is doing?"

He shrugged that off and rode on, arriving in Tulsa in mid-morning. He went directly to the land office, and spoke to the elderly clerk.

"Name's Brannigan," he introduced himself. "I'd like to make inquiry about some land out near Terrapin Creek over to the west."

The clerk smiled and unrolled several maps. He indicated the settlement of homesteaders with a pencil, followed the course of the creek.

"This strip here," Brannigan said, and pointed to the map. "About six hundred acres. I'd like to buy it. How much an acre?"

"Sorry, but that piece was sold early this morning," the clerk replied. "For a dollar and a quarter an acre, and two years tenancy."

"Mind telling me who bought it?"

"Miss Sharon Brodie," the clerk answered. "She's at the Tulsa House. You might make a deal with her."

Brannigan's eyes narrowed as he thanked the clerk and turned away. He rode up the street to the fairly large Tulsa House. Brannigan rode into a livery barn next door, told the stableman to grain his horse, and carried his bedroll to the hotel. He signed the register:

O. Brannigan, Terrapin Valley

The clerk handed Brannigan a key.

"A neighbor of yours is here," he said. "Perhaps you know her?"

"Miss Brodie?" Brannigan asked.

The clerk nodded. "She came to town to buy some prairie land."

"I've met her," Brannigan said carelessly.

He went to his room and cleaned up, then went downstairs and took a chair on the broad gallery at the front of the hotel. Rolling a smoke, he leaned back to watch the cowboys riding by.

Brannigan flicked his cigarette away when he saw Sharon Brodie coming up the street. She was wearing tailored riding trousers tucked down into pee-wee boots. A white shirt of heavy silk was open at the neck, and caught with a silken neckerchief. A gray 7 X beaver Stetson emphasized the blackness of her hair, and although she wore no gun-belt, the unmistakable shine of a holster was visible on the right leg of her trousers.

She stopped abruptly when she felt Brannigan's steady gaze upon her. Then she came toward him with a smile of welcome.

"Howdy, neighbor," she greeted. "What are you doing away over here?"

Brannigan came to his fet, removing his hat. "Great minds run in the same channels," he answered gravely.

Sharon sat down in a big chair. "I'm not sure that I understand you," she said.

"I came over to buy some land," Brannigan explained. "I'll give you double what you paid for that piece in the strip!"

Sharon stared, then shook her head. "It's not for sale."

"You bought it for your father?"

"For myself. I had some money, and I wanted some land."

"You were studying the boundaries the day your horse was shot," Brannigan said, suddenly understanding.

"Are you sorry you saved my life now?" she asked bluntly.

"I'm glad," he answered softly.

"There's other land," Sharon said. "And it's cheap."

"Hmm," Brannigan murmured. "So there is."

"I must go to my room now," Sharon told him. "I am leaving after dinner, and will ride back home with some friends."

BRANNIGAN arose, and watched her move into the hotel with a free swing. And yet there was nothing masculine about the pretty girl.

He walked back to the land office, picked up the roll of maps still lying on the counter, and studied one of them. To the clerk he indicated a wedge of land on the north side of Terrapin Creek.

"Is this land open?" he asked.

"That's a bit more than two sections,"

the clerk explained. "It can be bought for a dollar and a quarter an acre, and two years tenancy."

"I'll take it," Brannigan answered. "I have a certified check on a Portland bank, and I will leave it here with you to clear."

The clerk took the check, and explained further:

"There are twelve hundred and fifty acres, at a dollar and a quarter an acre. Six dollars filing fee, and twelve dollars for registration and ownership papers. That will come to fifteen hundred and ninety-one dollars, and fifty cents. This check is for two thousand. I'll hold the balance due you for a future call."

"Thank you," Brannigan said, and left the office.

He saw Sharon Brodie riding down the street with a man and a woman, and he shrugged.

"Like she told me," he muttered, "there is plenty of cheap land!"

As he approached the Tulsa House, a tall, lanky, hard-faced man with a domineering, rasping voice, called to him from the livery barn.

"Hey, hombre! Come here!"

Brannigan stopped and stared at the strange man, evidently a cowboy, and his eyes dropped to the fellow's holstered six-shooter. The holster was tied-down and toed-in for a fast draw. Brannigan's eyes narrowed.

"Something you want?" he asked the hard-faced gunman.

"I said to come here!"

"Go to hell!" Brannigan answered coldly. But watching the tall stranger he felt the old familiar tingle in the fingers of his right hand.

"The name is Stratton," the man said. "I'm from Texas."

"So?" Brannigan murmured.

"So we don't like fences or such," the man who called himself Stratton said harshly. "You bought some land in the land office a while ago."

"I bought some land," Brannigan agreed.

"I want that land, and I'll pay you a dollar more an acre for it," Stratton offered. "You don't have much choice."

"It's not for sale," Brannigan said softly, but his eyes were smoldering with anger.

"Better take a profit," Stratton urged. "Up to now I've never shot—*second!*"

"There always has to be a first time," Brannigan retorted.

Stratton allowed his eyes to flicker briefly to two men who were watching.

"You killed a saddle pard of mine!" he shouted loudly. "I taken up for him!"

His left hand jerked out in an attempt to distract Brannigan's attention, as his right hand hurtled down toward his holstered gun. But Brannigan was watching, and made his strike with the suddenness of a bolt of heat lightning.

The two six-shooters shed leather at the same time. Brannigan caught his sights as the gun was coming up, while Stratton threw high and snapped down to line the sights on his six-shooter.

The two explosions sounded like a rolling stutter. The black Stetson leaped from Brannigan's head. Stratton took a backward step, jerked to the left, and fell hard. The smoking pistol spilled from his hand and clattered across the dusty board walk.

Brannigan caught his bucking gun on the recoil, and eared back the hammer for a follow-up. He crouched, watching Stratton from slitted eyes.

Stratton's long legs straightened slowly. He jerked convulsively, and the toe of his right boot rattled a tattoo on the splintered planking.

Brannigan whirled to face a man who was hurrying toward him. A ball-pointed star was pinned to the fellow's worn vest.

"I'm Joe Blanton, town marshal," he said. "Stratton asked for it and he got it. I'll have to take you in for arraignment, but the verdict will be justifiable homicide. Nice shooting, Brannigan!"

"Thank you, Marshal," Brannigan said slowly. "How'd you know my name?"

"From your description. I was talking to Jeff Morrow a few days ago. Was this Stratton working for Brodie or Jenkins?"

"That's what I've got to find out," Brannigan said. "The stableman saw this whole ruckus. Will he do for a witness?"

"I'll call Tom," the Marshal agreed, and the three men walked up the street to the jail office. "The judge holds court next door," Blanton said.

THE elderly judge looked at Brannigan from under shelving gray eyebrows, listened to the marshal's report, and sent the coroner down to examine the deceased.

"Your name?" he asked Brannigan.

"Brannigan, Your Honor."

"First name?"

"O," Brannigan answered.

"Spell it out," the judge prompted.

Brannigan frowned. "Make it Oscar," he lied with a straight face.

"Who shot first?" the judge asked.

"Your Honor, it was a draw, you might say," Blanton explained. "Stratton picked the trouble. It was strictly in self-defense, and Tom Jones will tell you the same."

"You are free to leave town, Mr. O. Brannigan," the judge said sternly after he had heard the witnesses. "Case dismissed!"

"Thank you, Your Honor," Brannigan murmured, and left the court-room.

The town marshal followed him outside.

"The coroner passed me the word, Brannigan," he murmured. "Stratton had two pards, and they swore to square up for him. Watch yourself!"

Brannigan thanked him and headed for the hotel. Now he was once more hunted, and he scanned each face as he walked down the street. Back in his room, he cleaned his six-shooter and sat down to piece out the puzzle.

He wondered if Sharon Brodie had had anything to do with Stratton. He had seen no sign of Buff Brodie or his son.

Brannigan glanced idly out the window and jerked erect at sight of the familiar face of a man who was talking to two gun-hung men who were strange to Brannigan. Jasper Jenkins was the third of the trio! Now Brannigan believed he knew who had hired Stratton to make the offer for the land he had just bought.

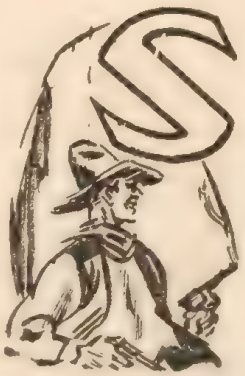
The Southwest was crawling with saddle-tramps who sold their guns to the highest bidder, Brannigan knew. He was safe enough in Tulsa, but out on the open prairie he would be fair bait for any gun-swift who was out for bounty.

As Brannigan was eating supper in a restaurant, Marshal Blanton came in and took a seat at his table, ordered a steak, and spoke in a whisper.

"Stratton's pards are Crag Trenton and Snake Holliday. Holliday is the one with the snakeskin hatband. It sounds off like a diamondback every time Snake shakes his head. Watch them, Brannigan!"

CHAPTER XII

"This Means War!"



SLOWLY Brannigan drank his coffee. He arose then and paid for his meal, leaving before any suspicion should fall on Blanton of having warned him. Walking to the livery barn, Brannigan told Tom Jones to have his horse fed before daybreak.

"That might give you a head start on Trenton and Holliday," Jones murmured. "Watch Snake! He'll kill you without warning!"

Brannigan paid Jones for the care of his horse and went directly to his room, but did not make a light. He sat by the window for a while, then undressed and crawled into bed. He would be safe until he left Tulsa.

Brannigan was up before daylight and ready to ride. He had paid for his room when he registered, so he left the hotel by a side door.

Tom Jones had his horse grained and brushed. Brannigan saddled the Morgan and tied his bedroll behind the cantle.

"Those two got drunk last night," Jones said. "They stabled their horses here—that tall bay and the rangy roan."

Brannigan took a good look at the two horses, then mounted and rode out of the

barn. He was his old confident self as he rode across the broad prairie hour after hour, stopping only for a rest at noon. He reached the McCullough place just before dark, off-saddled and staked his horse to graze, and rolled his bed on some bluestem hay in the barn.

Brannigan ate some sandwiches he had brought from a lunchroom in Tulsa. He denied himself a smoke, rolled into his soogans, and was asleep almost at once.

He was up early, and had been in the saddle an hour and was in enemy country when, scanning the western skyline, he saw something move against the early half-light. In a little while he drew a deep breath of relief when he recognized the two men riding toward him—Clyde Ferris and Claude Brewster.

The two homesteaders lifted their horses into a high lope when they recognized Brannigan, and he hastened to meet them. They were about ten miles from the settlement, which meant that if they were seen by Jasper Jenkins and his herders the sheepmen would have an advantage on what they considered their own range.

Claude Brewster circled his horse to a stop as Brannigan reined in. Brewster was not usually excitable, but he was now.

"They're right alongside us on this side of the creek!" he shouted. "Buff Brodie sent his crew down last night. It means real trouble, Brannigan!"

"I'm afraid so," Brannigan agreed. "And there isn't much we can do about it."

"We can, if you bought that land," Brewster declared.

"Brodie beat me to it by an hour," Brannigan admitted.

Brewster's face clouded. "That puts the Two B right in our back yard!" he said. "They can cut our fences here and there, because we can't patrol them all, day and night."

"Did you ever hear of a cross-fire?" Brannigan asked, his face stony.

"But we can't work a cross-fire!" Ferris interrupted.

"Are you telling me, or asking me?" Brannigan asked coldly.

Ferris glanced up quickly. He had learned that Brannigan always had a good and definite reason for any statement he made.

"You bought land!" he guessed shrewdly. "On the other side of the creek!"

"I bought the Wedge," Brannigan told him. "It has a stand of timber on it. We can get into the Wedge the same way Brodie's men got into the Strip."

"You mean under cover of night?" Brewster asked.

Brannigan nodded. "How's the reservoir?" he asked.

"Full up, and spilling into the big tank," Ferris said gleefully. "But the water in the creek is going down."

"The rains were light last winter," Brannigan reminded. "So we will protect that tank, send a guard over to the Wedge, and at least force Brodie into another stalemate."

"Did you have any trouble in Tulsa?" Brewster asked watching Brannigan's face closely. "You did," he answered himself, when Brannigan's right hand touched his six-shooter. "You killed a man!"

Brannigan nodded. "A hired gun-fighter by the name of Stratton. He was planted. He offered me a bonus for the land I bought, and went for his gun when I turned down his offer."

HE EXPLAINED briefly about the fight, the town marshal, and his meeting with Sharon Brodie. He also told about seeing Holliday and Trenton with Jasper Jenkins in Tulsa.

"I can't reason it," Brewster admitted, as they rode away. "Jenkins and Brodie quarreled, they killed each other's stock. Now Brodie's men move over on our side of the creek, and Jenkins hires gunhands. What do you make of it, Brannigan?"

"Water," Brannigan said bluntly. "We'll have all the water we need, while Brodie and Jenkins will have to move their stock to where they have more feed and water. Naturally they don't want to move."

"We need more law," Brewster said doggedly.

"We have enough law," Brannigan said quietly. "Every man carries what he needs in his holster."

Brewster and Ferris sensed that he was forming a plan as the three men rode on in silence.

"We won't have any trouble with the sheepmen this mornin'," he said confidently. "Now listen close so you'll know what to do. We won't have time to talk when we reach the Circle F. You, Ferris, take five of the younger men tonight and get across the creek into the Wedge. Brewster, you take five men and fort up on my land north of the big tank, behind those logs we stacked up. I'll stay close to the Circle F. Brodie might consent to make medicine before dark, so we'll give him that chance."

They were now within sight of the settlement, and a big man was riding to meet them.

"John Fairtree," Brannigan said. "Seems worried."

Fairtree rode one of his big Percherons, and carried a rifle in his blocky hands. He greeted Brannigan, explaining that two 2 B cowboys were close to the fences on the north side.

"Now we can drive 'em out!" Fairtree said. "You bought the Strip?"

"Brodie bought it," Brannigan said, and smiled coldly as he saw Fairtree's chagrin. "I bought the Wedge on the other side of the creek," he added.

They rode into the Fairtree yard where some of the homesteaders had gathered. All were heavily armed. Brannigan, leaving Brewster and Ferris to relay the happenings, rode to the barn and stripped his riding gear and hurried to the house. Ma Fairtree said she would have breakfast ready by the time he had washed.

"We missed you, Oscar," she said, mischief in her brown eyes.

Brannigan stared at her, and his mind flashed back to Tulsa. Sharon, or one of the other Brodies had heard of the court proceedings, and the news had traveled fast.

"My name is not Oscar," he said with dignity. "I'd like it better if you'd just call me—Brannigan!"

"I'm sorry, Brannigan," Ma said contritely. "But some of those Two B cowboys shouted that they wanted to talk to Oscar Brannigan."

The smoldering gleam in his eyes more pronounced, he sat down at the table. Ma placed a bowl of stewed dried peaches before him. Then she gave him a heaping plate of ham and eggs, followed by a huge stack of flannel cakes and wild honey.

Brannigan ate silently, his forehead corrugated to show the intensity of his thinking.

"I missed your cooking, Ma," he confessed, with the frankness of a growing boy when he had finished. "Now I feel like a new man."

"You are a different man," Ma said gravely.

John Fairtree nodded. "But I like you better this way, Brannigan," he said grimly. "War is here, and we need a fighting man of experience. You do the planning and we'll follow your orders!"

"Tell the men to get ready to ride with me to the creek fences," Brannigan said sternly. "We'll try to talk to Brodie or his rep, and maybe save some trouble. I'll join you as soon as I have another cup of hot java."

John Fairtree hurried from the big kitchen.

"It's something about Sharon," Ma said quietly. "I might be wrong, but I think she is honest and fine!"

"Why?" Brannigan asked bluntly.

"Because I know her mother, Amy Brodie," Ma said confidently. "Are you forgetting that Sharon didn't hold with Junior when he picked that fight with you down at Carlson's store?"

BRANNIGAN nodded, then his face hardened again.

"But she bought the Strip an hour before I got there," he insisted stubbornly. "Now the Two B crew is in our back yard!"

"Just hold judgment a spell, Brannigan," Ma Fairtree said. "You'll find that Amy and Sharon Brodie are not like their

hot-headed men folks."

"She could have sold me that land," Brannigan argued.

"She has to live with Buff Brodie and Junior," Ma reminded. "And Sharon might have bought that land for herself."

"For what?" Brannigan demanded. "She'll own half of the Two B some day."

"Sharon is proud," Ma said. "She already has a small herd of cattle, and she might even be thinking of finishing her beef for market like we intend to do. That Strip would make a mighty fine feed lot, which you said yourself."

Brannigan arose from the table. He put his arms around Ma and kissed her.

"You've got more savvy than I'll ever have, Ma," he whispered. "Now I'll be getting down to the creek."

He left the kitchen and hurried across the yard.

Clint had saddled a fresh horse for Brannigan, and he handed over the bridle reins.

"You do the talking, Brannigan," John Fairtree said. "We'll be ready to back up any order you give!"

"We'll ride outside the fences," Brannigan told the men. "We own the land fifty feet north of our outside fence. I saw to that when we stretched the wire, and we'll stay on our own land. "Let's go!"

He rode out of the yard in the lead. Eight men followed him; eight determined men with six-shooters strapped to their legs, and with rifles in their strong brown hands.

It was mid-morning under a bright sun. The early summer heat was gathering strength, a promise and a warning of hotter days to come. Already the browse was brown and tinder dry.

Three cowboys were lounging in their saddles close to the outside double fence facing the creek. One was Jud Cummings, ramrod of the 2 B spread. He straightened up as the riders neared him, and spoke to his two companions. Both straightened in their saddles with rifles ready.

Brannigan stopped his horse ten paces from the 2 B men.

"You sooners are trespassing, Brannigan!" Cummings warned sternly.

"Lay your hackles, Cummings," Brannigan said soothingly. "You Two B hombres are committing the trespass."

"Guess again," Cummings retorted. "The Two B owns this strip now, and we aim to hold it!"

"But we own the land fifty feet outside the fence," Brannigan said. "We built our fences for that reason, so you boys just step your horses back a few paces!"

"Give the word, Jud!" one of the cowboys cried. "We'll blow Brannigan out of his saddle before he has time to spit!"

Brannigan's right hand dipped down like a flash of light. The 2 B cowboy choked as he looked into the bore of Brannigan's leaping six-shooter.

"Tell him, Jud," he appealed to Cummings.

"We expected something like this," Cummings said with a wide grin. "So I planted four men back there in that copse of post-oak. They have rifles trained on you sooners!"

Brannigan glanced at the wooded section. Two men were standing behind trees, with rifles in their hands.

"We came down to make medicine," he said. "So before we begin, tell your men to get back on Two B graze."

"You tell 'em," Cummings said lazily.

Brannigan shifted his gun to cover the big 2 B foreman. "You're giving the orders, and I'll get you first," he warned. "Well?"

"Fall back a piece," Cummings growled, and backed his horse smartly.

"Where's Buff Brodie?" Brannigan growled.

"Minding his own business, and it ain't none of yours," Cummings said acidly. "There ain't too much water in the creek."

"So tell your boss to drill a well," Brannigan snapped.

"You tell him," Cummings sneered. "Yonder he comes now!"

BUFF BRODIE rode out from the cover of the trees fast and slid his horse to a stop.

"Git!" he bellowed at Brannigan. "Be-

fore I give the word to my men to empty your saddle!"

"I'll make you a bet," Brannigan drawled. "I'll bet my new land against yours that I can get you and Cummings before your men can smoke me down."

"Better not say the word, Boss," Cummings said nervously. "You've seen that gun-swift work!"

"Strangers coming, Brannigan," Clint Fairtree warned in a whisper. "Tall gent on a big bay; another one on a rangy roan. They are rubbing stirrups with that sheeper, Jasper Jenkins!"

Brannigan kept his eyes on Brodie and Cummings, but he recognized the description of the two horses. The riders would be Crag Trenton and "Snake" Holliday. But Brannigan was still puzzled about the connection between Jenkins and Brodie.

"Cover Brodie," Brannigan said to Clint. "Just to keep him honest. He won't give the—word!"

Clint drew his six-shooter smoothly. He had been an apt pupil of Brannigan who was satisfied by the smoothness and speed of the young man's draw. He holstered his own gun as he hipped about in the saddle to face the three approaching riders.

They did not join Brodie's men, but stopped their horses ten paces away.

"So we caught up with a killer," Jasper Jenkins sneered. "Tell him about it, Snake!"

Snake Holliday shook his head, and the faint buzz of a rattler filled the morning air. It took the eyes of every man to Holliday's battered Stetson and the hatband which was the skin of a huge diamond-backed rattler, with the rattles still attached. He was a tall, thin man, thin of face, and narrow between the eyes. Those small greenish eyes stared balefully at Brannigan.

"You damn killer!" he spat out. "You killed my saddle pard on a sneak, with the law to side you!"

Brannigan studied the evil face with candid interest. Every man present knew that Snake Holliday was calling for showdown. Every man shuddered when Holliday shook his head to make the rattles talk noisily. All but Brannigan.

"Stratton was a hired killer," he said flatly. "He staked out to bring me smoke. And he shot—second!"

"Tell him, Snake," Crag Trenton said harshly. "He can't hightail now. His gang is outnumbered. I never did think much of a damned sod-buster nohow!"

"Let's keep it between me and Snake," Brannigan suggested, as the homesteaders muttered angrily. "Your deal, Snake!"

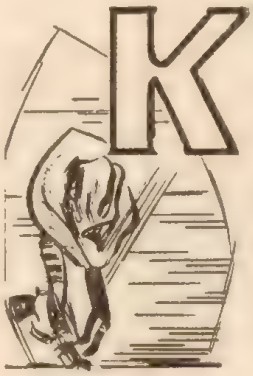
"Fair enough!" Jasper Jenkins shouted. "All hands keep out. This is between Brannigan and Snake!"

"Is that agreed?" Brannigan asked Buff Brodie. "Or do we have a general war when Holliday and I begin smoking?"

"It's between you and him," Brodie growled. "You Two B men stay out."

CHAPTER XIII

Fighting Fire With Fire



KNOWING that Snake Holliday was watching every move, with his right hand hovering above his holstered .45, Brannigan moved his horse away from his companion. When he stopped the mount, he turned slightly to the right.

"It's still your deal," he said to the gunman.

He showed only an intense interest in his scowling opponent. Snake Holliday puckered his thin lips and shook the rattles on his hatband.

"I'm waiting up for Stratton," he said in a thin whisper, "and I'm coming out *smoking!*"

His right hand, gripping his gun, slashed up like burnished silver, with orange flame lancing from the barrel of the heavy weapon. Brannigan twitched his right shoulder, and in the instant that his six-shooter cleared leather, knew that he would not have time to catch his sights.

His Peacemaker .45 Colt roared thunderously from the hip, and Snake Holliday was battered backward over the cantle of his saddle as his own weapon bellowed.

Brannigan was slapped to the left as lead bit deep into his shoulder. He caught his bucking gun on the recoil, swiveled slightly in the saddle, and chopped a shot at Crag Trenton who was clawing his iron from holster-leather.

Trenton grunted and slid from his high saddle. But his battered gray Stetson flew into the air before Trenton fell, taking part of the killer's head with it.

Before Trenton's boots began to rattle, Brannigan had his cocked six-shooter centered on Jasper Jenkins. The sheepman, caught with his pistol half out of leather, raised both hands with ludicrous haste.

"Don't shoot!" he screamed. "I don't want no part of it!"

"You mangy coyote!" Brannigan said, his deep voice humming. "The next time you make a pass at me, I'll kill you for trying, and I'll kill you slow!"

Snake Holliday was trying to sit up, and he was holding his middle with both hands.

"First time I was ever—faded!" he gasped weakly.

Brannigan watched with no pity in his eyes. His lean jaw had tightened to make little ridges of muscle around his mouth. Snake Holliday swayed and fell over on his back. A dry rattle sounded from his throat.

"He's gone to join Stratton, and Trenton," Brannigan told Jenkins. "Your money hired them."

"It was Brodie's money!" Jenkins corrected. "The thousand I won from him at Carlson's store, the night you whipped Junior."

"Why, you unwashed son of a Siwash!" Buff Brodie shouted.

"Hold it, Brodie!" Brannigan said sternly. "He's just trying to cloud the sign. Did you have anything to do with hiring those killers?"

"I didn't, but the hell with you!" Brodie yelled. "You clear off my land before I give my men the word!"

"Tell him, Jenkins," Brannigan prompted the sheepman. "Maybe Brodie won't give the word!"

"You're in the middle, Brodie," Jenkins said, with an oily smile. "Brannigan bought the Wedge in Tulsa!"

Brodie stared with his mouth open. He forgot his anger as he glanced at the wedge of land just across from the Cirle F, on the other side of the creek.

"Is that straight?" Brodie asked Brannigan, his lips twisting.

Brannigan nodded. "Fightin' fire with fire, you might say. And right now we have six men in the Wedge, with their rifles trained on your Two B men. You still want to give the word to your boys back there in the trees?"

"We can get 'em comin' or goin'!" Brodie roared.

"We can get your boys on this side of the creek," Brannigan reminded the angry cattleman.

BUFF BRODIE glared at the low water of the creek and became angrier.

"You and that damned well!" he shouted. "You've emptied Terrapin Creek! I'll law you from here to who laid the chunk!"

"That's your privilege." Brannigan shrugged. "My advice to you would be to drill yourself a deep well."

"You can't steal the water!" Brodie yelled. "I'll call in the troops to stop you!"

"You've been stealing land for years," Brannigan pointed out. "So what's the difference? But we're not stealing any water from the creek, Brodie. You still want to play rough?"

"I'll get you, Brannigan!" Brodie promised thickly. "One way or another, I'll nail your hide to the barn!"

John Fairtree said: "You've seen what happens to those who try to get Brannigan, Brodie."

"And I'll run you out, Fairtree!" Brodie threatened the big homesteader.

He motioned to Cummings and the two 2 B cowboys.

"Let's ride!" he said shortly. "I'll see you nesters later!"

"Take it easy, squatter," Clint Fairtree called out suddenly. "And you better *buy* yourself some more land!"

"Quiet, Clint!" John Fairtree reproved. "Even if you did speak Gospel truth."

"We might as well get back to the work," Brannigan said, and all the fire had gone from his eyes. He shook his head slightly as he stared at three horses out on sheep graze.

"Don't feel bad about them two you salivated, pard," Clint said quickly. "They rode down here to kill you, and they framed it two-to-one. Trenton meant to get you between a cross-fire, but you were way ahead of him!"

"Thanks, Clint," Brannigan murmured. Wheeling his horse, he rode back to the Circle F at a dead run.

Ma Fairtree was waiting for him in the kitchen doorway.

"Who was it this time?" she asked soberly.

Brannigan stared for a moment. Then he turned and went back to the barn without speaking. He was sitting on a stack of barley sacks when John Fairtree came to stable the big Percheron. Fairtree took one look at Brannigan, stripped his riding gear, and hurried to the house.

"Did you say anything to Brannigan?" he asked his wife.

Ma Fairtree flushed with embarrassment. "Well, I asked him something," she admitted, "and I wish I'd bitten my tongue off. I asked him who it was this time, and he just walked away with his shoulders drooping."

"They brought it to him," Fairtree said grimly. "Two hired gun tramps rode up with Jasper Jenkins, and they both threw down on Brannigan." He stopped abruptly and turned toward the door. "I forgot," he said hastily. "Brannigan was hit in the left shoulder, and we forgot all about it. He never said a word!"

Ma Fairtree hurried to the barn. Brannigan was still sitting on the pile of sacks, and his left sleeve was soaked with blood.

"Better come in and let me dress that shoulder," Ma said in a soft voice. "I'm sorry."

"Oh, that?" Brannigan shrugged. "It's just a scratch."

"I mean for what I said," Ma murmured. "You did it for us, and I took a poor way of showing my gratitude."

"Somebody has to do the fighting, Ma," he said carelessly. "I'd be some grateful if you'd dress that pindly scratch, and then I think I'll move my gear down to my own place."

"You mean you'll leave us and stay down there alone?"

"I'm a killer, Brannigan answered bitterly. "I traveled fast and far to get away from killing, but it always follows me!"

"You won't go to the Gary place," Ma Fairtree said firmly. "We love you, and we want you to stay here with us."

Brannigan looked up at her, and his smile was warm. "Then I'll stay," he answered simply. "Now let's go back to the house and tie a rag around this bullet burn." . . .

AT EIGHT o'clock that night, when Brannigan rode out with several of the homesteaders, the first thing of interest they came upon was Junior Brodie, sitting near a campfire his men had kindled at the far end of the Strip. Three of the younger 2 B cowboys were with him for night-guard, and they made no pretense at secrecy. Neither did they show any fear of attack by Brannigan's men when they stopped to watch the cowboys.

Brannigan studied them for a time, then spoke quietly to Clyde Ferris.

"You've picked your five men to guard the Wedge?" he asked.

"That I have," Ferris answered. "And ready to ride."

"Better get on over there," Brannigan suggested. "Make a small fire, but don't sit around it. That may worry Junior, and might keep him honest."

Clyde Ferris called to his men and rode off into the night. Each man was armed. Frank Ferris rode with Gustaf Pederson, and young Mike Sullivan rubbed stirrups

with Ralph Brewster. Tom Carlton rode with Clyde Ferris who had chosen the younger men because they could get along with less sleep than their fathers.

"I wonder why Brannigan had the men take their teams over this afternoon, and drag a fire-break around the Wedge?" Tom asked Ferris.

"A prairie fire would travel fast now," Ferris answered brusquely. "Brannigan thinks of everything."

They made a camp in a stand of timber, after tying their horses to trees. Ferris took Ralph Brewster along when he walked to the far end of the Wedge nearest the Strip. Tinder and dry wood had been prepared, and Ferris struck a match and started his fire.

"That grass down in the Strip is as dry as tinder," Ferris remarked. "I hope none of those cowhands get careless."

"The grass is just as dry on this side," young Brewster said thoughtfully.

They withdrew from the fire, hunkered down behind an old deadfall, and watched the 2 B cowboys around the blazing fire across the creek in the Strip. Clyde Ferris stirred restlessly, and Ralph Brewster tested the wind with a wet finger.

"If that blaze got away from them, it would drive right toward our homesteads," he remarked. "They better not let it get away!"

"Brannigan is watching," Ferris assured. "Not only that, but we've got a wide fire-break made around the grain."

"The damn fools!" Ralph growled. "Look! They've heaped more tinder on that fire, and are moving back with their horses!"

"This could be serious," Ferris said gruffly. "You stay here on guard while I talk to the other boys!"

He mounted and rode away through the timber. Ralph sat on his heels, staring at the leaping fire across the creek. He came to his feet when he saw a cowboy appear out of the darkness and run toward the blazing fire. The 2 B cowboy was scattering the fire, throwing burning firewood in all directions! Then he raced away in the darkness.

Ralph stared, muttering low in his throat. Tongues of flame licked out where the dry grass began to kindle. Growling like an angry bear, Ralph ran to the small fire he and Clyde Ferris had kindled. He heaped dry tinder on the blaze, caught up two big burning limbs, and carried them across the fire-break to 2 B graze. He hurled the burning branches from him, then ran back to kick out the campfire. Quickly then he mounted his horse and joined his companions in the thick stand of timber to report.

"We can't do anything here," Clyde Ferris said, his deep voice anxious. "We better get across to give our folks a hand."

"They deliberately fired the grass!" Ralph Brewster accused gruffly. "I saw a Two B man scatter the fire all through the grass in the Strip!"

He said nothing about his own retaliation, and the six men rode out of the Wedge, and across the now shallow creek. They rode to the Gary place, where they found most of the homesteaders stationed to form bucket brigades.

"Where's Brannigan?" Clyde Ferris called. "That fire will jump our fire-break unless the wind changes!"

"Brannigan and George Fairtree are floodin' the ditch we cut last week," Wilhelm Mueller explained. "All they have to do is open the gate at each end toward the creek. The tank is almost full."

FERRIS rode to the big earthen tank, where he found Brannigan watching a rush of water pouring from the tank through a timbered spillway. The escaping water was rushing through a three-foot-deep ditch which was thirty feet wide. George Fairtree opened the water-gate at the west end of the tank, there joined Ferris and Brannigan who were staring at the raging fire in the long, narrow Strip.

"Look yonder!" George Fairtree cried and pointed across the creek. "There's another fire on Two B graze, and the wind has shifted!"

"Looks like they dug a pit and fell into it," Brannigan said. "Ferris, did you start

that blaze to even up the score?"

"Not me," Ferris denied indignantly. Then he caught his breath suddenly. "I left Ralph Brewster at the fire we built. I wonder now—"

"If we ask Ralph no questions," Brannigan said, "he'll tell us no lies."

"We can save our fences now with wet sacks," Ferris suggested. "That shift in the wind has slowed this fire down to a crawl."

Within ten minutes every man and most of the women in the settlement were beating out the crawling tongues of flamé with wet sacks. The women dipped the sacks into the ditch, passed them under the fences, and the men quickly beat out the flames before they could reach the double fence.

Across the creek, the flames had gathered headway, and were racing through the dry grass.

Fanned by a strong wind, the Two B summer browse was being destroyed by the advancing wall of flame.

BRANNIGAN was watching the destruction when John Fairtree came to him and spoke sadly.

"Somebody decided to fight fire with fire," Fairtree said mournfully. "Now it looks like Brodie will *have* to move to the mountain pastures for feed and water. Could we ride over and help the Two B?"

"We'd get shot out of our saddles," Brannigan answered bluntly.

"Buff Brodie can stop that fire if he has a full crew out workin'," John Fairtree said hopefully.

The grass was burned to the north bank of the creek now, and the fire was six or seven miles to the north. Because of the fire-break, Brannigan's two sections had escaped.

"I wonder if Buff Brodie still thinks he can do all his work from the saddle," George Fairtree asked. "He sneered at our fire-breaks, said it was busting the sod!"

"He'll come to hay-farming and draft horses—and bob-wire fences," Brannigan predicted firmly.

CHAPTER XIV

Women Take a Hand

POSTING a fire-guard to patrol the big ditch, Brannigan told the men they might as well get some sleep. He and George Fairtree closed the water-gates.

The odor of burning grass was strong in the night air. Only a flickering line of flame showed in the northeast, though, and this was dying down in spots to tell of the battle being waged by the Two B crew.

"The Strip is ruined for grazing this year," George Fairtree remarked. "But the burn will make plenty of grass for next year." He yawned and stretched his arms over his head. "The Two B outfit will be too busy to give us any more trouble tonight."

Brannigan agreed, saying he would keep up the patrol until daybreak. Only four men were on guard, one of them Ralph Brewster. Brannigan sat down beside him in the shadow of the reservoir to rest.

"That kind of squares up for Carter Ferris," Ralph commented.

"How is his arm?" Brannigan asked.

"He's carrying it in a sling now," Ralph answered. "Look, Brannigan. I saw that Two B cowboy start the fire down there in the Strip. Then they rode hell-for-leather away, hoping the fire would wipe out the whole settlement!"

"We stopped it," Brannigan said carelessly. "It didn't get to the fences, and the ditch would have stopped it anyhow."

"There wasn't any ditches on the other side of the creek," Ralph said with smug satisfaction.

"Now say I wanted to get even," Brannigan remarked thoughtfully, "I'd keep it to myself and get on with my work."

Ralph Brewster glanced quickly at Brannigan and nodded his head. "That's

the way I'd do it, too," he agreed.

Brannigan walked to the house. In the kitchen, Ma Fairtree had a big pot of coffee on the back of the stove, and a sliced ham on a big platter.

"Better have a snack, Brannigan," she suggested. "Before you ride across the creek." She turned slowly to face him with a grin. "The owner of the Strip will be riding down to look over her property about daybreak. It don't take a mind-reader to figure that out."

Brannigan shook his head. He made a big sandwich and sat down at the table. He ate thoughtfully for a moment, sipped his hot coffee, and sighed.

"I don't know how you do it, Ma," he admitted finally. "How did you know I was going to ride across to the Wedge?"

"I was young once," Ma said. "And I've raised three boys, counting John. You aren't much different."

"Woman's intuition," Brannigan declared earnestly. "And you've also learned to read sign with the best."

"Sharon will be angry," Ma Fairtree said musingly. "She'll tell you she hates you, but—" she added as a suggestion—"there's water enough to supply the Strip."

Brannigan thrust out his jaw stubbornly. "I'm not helping the Brodies," he said flatly. "Not any of them, after what Junior did tonight!"

"Is Junior—Sharon?" Ma asked meaningly. Then quickly she changed the subject. "How is your shoulder?"

Brannigan shrugged. "A bit stiff, but most of the pain is gone."

"You ran a cow outfit one time," Ma said, with a smile. "Then something happened to change you."

"I did, but the land was bought and paid for," Brannigan admitted. "People began to move in, and the land was then too valuable just to use for grazing."

"So you sold some for farmland," Ma said. "And that made trouble with the other cattlemen."

Brannigan no longer attempted evasion. "Several big cattlemen had just grabbed thousands of acres of free graze," he told Ma. "They cut fences and burned the farmers' winter hay, destroyed grain crops, and did a lot of killin'."

"You didn't sell all your land up north?" Ma asked thoughtfully.

"I kept two thousand acres," Brannigan said. "Those farmers taught me the value of feeding and finishing good cattle. They taught most of the cattlemen the same thing, but it took several years. The cattlemen are making more money on less land, and those who didn't change had to go out of business."

HE STRETCHED to his feet, and tightened the black Stetson on his curly blond hair.

"It will soon be daylight," he remarked. "I'll be getting along now."

Brannigan went to the barn and saddled his Morgan horse. He rode to the creek, crossed the stream, and sent his horse into the timbered Wedge. He stopped at where the little fire had been carefully tramped out.

A rider appeared against the skyline, riding down from the north—a girl who rode with shoulders squared.

When Sharon Brodie rode closer, Brannigan could tell that she had been fighting fire. Her tan shirt was smudged and stained, and her face was sooty. He saw her lean forward in the saddle, staring through the early gloom, then ride directly toward him.

"Good morning, Oscar Brannigan," she greeted coldly.

Brannigan's face tightened from jaw to cheek-bones. "Good morning, Miss Brodie," he answered quietly. "The name is not Oscar."

"I see the Wedge did not get burned," Sharon said bitterly.

"We made a fire-break to keep such a thing from happening," Brannigan said, "and when Junior fired the Strip, he almost put your father out of business!"

Sharon straightened in the saddle, staring at Brannigan's stern face. "You say *Junior* started the fire?" she asked.

"He camped on your land with three men," Brannigan told her. "After a while

they rode away, but one cowboy came back and scattered their campfire all over the grass in the Strip, then all four of them rode off at a high lope."

Sharon stared out across the burnt grass to the creek, and beyond. "The fire didn't touch the settlement," she murmured.

"We beat out the fire with wet sacks, and filled the big ditch with water from the tank," Brannigan explained. "Then the wind changed and it didn't do the Two B summer graze much good!"

Sharon Brodie looked again over the fire-blackened prairie, and shook her head sadly.

"I'm sorry I called you Oscar," she said in a small voice. "I was mad enough to kill you when I rode down here, after fighting that prairie fire most of the night."

"I was mad enough to kill Junior, but I didn't," Brannigan said gruffly.

"Junior had been drinking," Sharon made a weak excuse. "He hates you, Brannigan!"

"Do you?" Brannigan asked bluntly.

Sharon raised her head and looked at him fully. "Not any more," she answered honestly. "I believe I see what you are trying to do here."

Brannigan stepped his horse toward her. She leaned almost imperceptibly toward him. Brannigan's strong arms went about her, drew her close, and he kissed her on the lips. Then he released her, waiting for the lightning to strike.

Sharon gasped, her lips parted to speak, then she smiled.

"You are strong," she murmured. "And very confident."

"As you are strong and confident," Brannigan said. "I did that before I had time to think, and I'm glad."

He waited, looking down at his saddle-horn. There was silence, and he raised his head when he felt the girl's dark eyes upon him.

"Kiss me again, Brannigan!" she said softly.

Brannigan was not the old fighting Brannigan when he circled Sharon with his arms, tilted back her head, and kissed her. For a time the world stood still. Then suddenly a thick, savage voice snarled:

"Break it up, Brannigan! And reach for sky!"

Brannigan felt Sharon move convulsively. He did not move, except to raise his head as he recognized the voice of Junior Brodie. He released Sharon, backed his horse a step, and faced Junior.

Young Brodie held a cocked pistol, and his face was flushed from drinking. And killer-lust was in his blood-shot eyes.

"I'm going to kill you, Brannigan!" he growled. "For insulting my sister!"

With a sharp cry, Sharon rode squarely between the two men.

"You are drunk, Junior!" she accused.

JUNIOR swerved his horse and threw a chopping shot at Brannigan. The slug whistled just over Brannigan's head, and he jabbed his horse with both blunted spurs. Before Junior could rear back for a follow-up, Brannigan's fist lashed out and caught him on the point of the chin.

Junior's head jerked back, the gun flew from his hand, and he toppled sideways from the saddle. Brannigan dismounted and crouched over the young fellow. Then he straightened to face Sharon.

"I'd have killed any other man," he said harshly, then became contrite as he saw the tears in Sharon's dark eye.

"Please go, Brannigan," she pleaded. "Before he comes to. I'll make him ride home with me. Oh, he's so different when he is sober!"

Brannigan climbed into his saddle, touched the brim of his Stetson.

"I'll meet you here tomorrow evening at sunset," Sharon said quickly. "No matter what happens, take care of yourself, Brannigan!"

Brannigan nodded and rode back to the Circle F.

Clint and John Fairtree were at the breakfast table. Clint looked at Brannigan's hand.

"You meet a sheeper?" he asked expectantly.

Brannigan frowned. He hadn't noticed the torn skin on one knuckle.

"When are you going to learn to stop blurtin' out everything that comes into your mind?" John Fairtree said to Clint.

"I met Junior Brodie," Brannigan explained. "He was drunk, and he got careless with his six-shooter. It didn't call for a killing."

"I'd have clipped his wings at least!" Clint muttered. "You're getting soft, pard!"

Brannigan turned his full gaze upon the scowling boy's face. His eyes narrowed, and his mouth tightened. Then he took a deep breath and started to eat his prunes.

"I'm sorry, Brannigan," Clint murmured. "But I'd kill anybody who did you a meanness!"

Brannigan dropped his spoon, and held out his right hand.

"Thanks, pard," he said earnestly. "That goes double!"

"Things will be quiet for a while," John Fairtree broke the long silence that followed to say. "The grain won't be ready to cut for another month. Anything special you want to do, Brannigan?"

Brannigan nodded eagerly. "I've got a plan," he said, "to maybe make a trade. If I drilled a deep well over in the Wedge, and brought in water, the Brodies might listen to reason!"

"You mean trade them the Wedge for the Strip?" John Fairtree asked.

"And they'd shoot you while you were drilling the well," Clint interrupted harshly. "I wouldn't trust that Junior Brodie with snow-water, and let him melt it himself!"

"I'd take care of myself," Brannigan promised grimly, and realized that he had repeated Sharon's words: "No matter what happens, take care of yourself, Brannigan!"

"And I'll side you all the way," Clint promised grimly.

"You'll do it the way Brannigan tells you," John Fairtree told his son sternly. "You hear me, boy?"

"I heard you, Dad," Clint answered respectfully. "But you also heard what I said."

"I could have a talk with Amy Brodie," Ma suggested. "The Two B is not making war on women, and Amy and I are good friends!"

"Might be a good idea, Ma," John Fairtree agreed. "We're willing to be good neighbors, and help the Two B all we can."

"I'll ride over there after I finish my chores," Ma promised eagerly.

"I'll ride with you," Clint said stubbornly.

Ma turned on Clint, her eyes blazing. "You'll stay home and mind your own business, yearling!" she said forcefully. "You'd start another war sure and certain."

"Right as rain, Ma," Brannigan agreed. "There has been enough fighting, and it's worth a try for peace."

"You were up all night, Brannigan," Ma said gently. "You better get a few hours of sleep."

"Just what I had in mind," Brannigan answered, left the table, and went to his room. As he undressed he could hear Ma washing the dishes, but he was asleep before she had finished her chores.

FAIRTREE saddled a gentle horse and brought it to the front of the ranchhouse. He helped Ma, who was wearing denim overalls and high-heeled boots, to mount.

"I left lunch on the table," she told him. "I'll be back about the middle of the afternoon. Keep Clint busy, and don't let him bother Brannigan."

She rode out of the yard, crossed the creek, and started across the Two B burn at a slow lope. It was seven miles to the Two B, but Ma Fairtree rode like a veteran. Like her men-folks, she was strong and confident.

She rode into the Two B yard an hour before noon, and a tall, handsome woman ran out to greet her.

"Mary Fairtree!" Amy Brodie called cordially. "I thought you had crossed me off your list, just because the boys are feuding!"

The two women embraced and Amy Brodie led the way into the house. Sharon,

she said, had been up all night, and was sleeping.

Suddenly Mrs. Brodie leaned forward and asked: "What kind of a man is this Brannigan, Mary?"

"He's fine and honest," Ma Fairtree said promptly. "He's a man of vision, Amy. He can see this country as it will be twenty years from now!"

"I wish Buff could see it as it will be five years from now," Mrs. Brodie said sadly. "His father moved out here from Tennessee, and just started to graze cattle. There were few people, and they took all the land as far as the cattle roamed. Buff thinks he can keep it, but I know better."

"That certainly is the truth, Amy," Ma Fairtree said. "You've seen the dry years, more of them than I have. There will be more, and the cattle will die unless they have water." She added pointedly, "Deep water."

"That's what Sharon told her father and Junior," Mrs. Brodie murmured. "They both got very angry, told her to leave business to men-folks."

"So Sharon bought the Strip," Ma Fairtree prompted. "Brannigan wanted that piece of land."

"He might get it," Mrs. Brodie confided. "Brannigan bought the Wedge, and Sharon is going to ask him what he will charge to drill a deep well there!"

Ma Fairtree sat up with a startled gasp. "Does Sharon have a crystal ball?" she whispered.

"Does any woman need one?" Amy Brodie asked.

"You're right," Ma Fairtree admitted. "But just this morning, Brannigan said that he was going to drill a deep well over on the Wedge."

"Thank Brannigan for not killing my boy, Mary," Mrs. Brodie said slowly. "He had every right."

"That's what I mean when I said that Brannigan was honest and fine, Amy," Ma Fairtree said warmly. "Brannigan would never have taken an advantage. He is the strongest man I have ever seen, and the gentlest. Strong men are usually gentle, Amy."

"Too bad you haven't got a daughter," Amy Brodie said musingly.

"You have a daughter," Ma Fairtree said quickly. "And a mighty fine one. I love Sharon."

"And you love Brannigan," Amy Brodie added. "As much as if he was your own son."

"I do," Ma Fairtree admitted proudly. "Every man and woman in the settlement has changed—and for the better since Brannigan rode in. He is like one of my own family."

"I'd like to meet him," Mrs. Brodie said.

"Ride over for a visit with me," Ma suggested. "I don't know much about him, except that he used to own a big cattle ranch up in Oregon. He sold part of his land to farmers who moved out from the Middle West, and he says he learned a lot from them."

"You'll stay for dinner?"

"I counted on it," Ma Fairtree admitted shamelessly. "Then we can have a nice long visit. Will the men ride in for dinner?"

"Not today," Mrs. Brodie answered. "They're moving the cattle to the mountain ranges for the summer, and took the chuckwagon with them. They might be gone for a week."

CHAPTER XV

Premonition of Danger

HUMMING a tune of the long cattle-trails Sharon Brodie rode across the Two B burn. It was early twilight, and a cool evening breeze blew down from the northeast. Sharon was smiling because she'd had a long talk with her mother.

Sharon knew that she and her mother talked a different language than Junior and her father. They had different thoughts about the future of Oklahoma

Territory, and the people who were flowing in to increase the population. But in certain fixed matters, the Brodies were united. They did not think highly of sheep, or the men who herded the animals. Sheep grazed down to the grass roots, and packed those roots into the soil with their sharp hoofs. If sheep stayed on a piece of ground for a month, it would be two years before the grass grew there again.

On the other hand, sheepmen claimed that six sheep could do well on browse where one cow would starve to death. The answer was to keep sheep and cattle on their own graze. So the Two B kept their cattle to the north and west, while the Jenkins brothers grazed their sheep to the east and south.

Sharon wrinkled her nose as she rode toward the Wedge to meet Brannigan. The strong oily smell of sheep was distasteful to her. She veered to the west to avoid a band of sheep grazing close to Terrapin Creek, and passed a barren little flat where sheepherders had made a camp. Refuse littered the ground. Sheepherders seldom cleaned up. Usually when a camp got too dirty they only moved to another location.

Sharon sent her rangy bay down through a deep buffalo defile to make a short-cut. She reined in abruptly when she saw a horse dragging its bridle reins. The horse was a chunky grulla, carrying the 2 B brand.

Sharon rode close and reached out for the trailing whangs. She rode deeper into the wallow, leading the horse. Her breath caught in her throat when she saw the body of a man lying on the ground behind a clump of creosote bushes. She dismounted and hurried to him.

"Junior!" she cried. "Are you hurt?"

She received no answer, then she was on her knees beside her brother. She moaned as she turned him over and saw his battered face, but sighed with relief when she saw that Junior's eye were closed. A dead man's eyes would be wide open.

She bent down and smelled Junior's lips. The strong odor of whisky was unmistakable. The left side of his head was bruised and swollen. Sharon ran back to her horse and took a small canteen from her saddle-horn.

Panic seized her after she had worked fifteen minutes and failed to restore her brother to consciousness. She ran to her horse and rode south at a gallop.

The horse was leathered with sweat when she rode into the timbered Wedge. Brannigan took one swift glance at Sharon as she slid her bay to a stop and shouted a question at him savagely.

"Have you seen Junior this afternoon?"

Brannigan shook his head. "I haven't seen him since our little argument," he answered. "What's happened?"

Sharon searched the depths of his eyes, then said: "Sorry, Brannigan. Will you ride with me—fast?"

"I'll be right at your heels!" Brannigan said without hesitation.

She wheeled her horse and raced back, with Brannigan coming up fast.

"What about Junior?" he called sharply.

"I found him unconscious in a wallow!" Sharon cried. "He has been beaten almost to death!"

When she veered into the wallow, Brannigan was right at the heels of her laboring horse. He lit down running, went to his knees beside Junior Brodie, and growled savagely when he saw the cowboy's battered features.

SHARON hunkered down on the other side of her unconscious brother. Brannigan passed the tips of his fingers across young Brodie's face.

"Nose broke, jaw fractured on the right side!" he muttered. His sensitive fingers passed across the swelling on Junior's head, and he stared hard at Sharon.

"He's got a fractured skull," he announced in a low whisper. "Someone beat him up while he was too drunk to put up a fight!"

"Oh!" Sharon moaned, her dark eyes wide with fear. "Who could have done it?"

"Nobody but a sheepherder would beat up a drunken man and leave him to die!"

Brannigan growled.

"You think he will—die?" Sharon whispered.

Brannigan leaped to his feet. "Take my horse!" he shouted. "Burn his hocks getting back to the Circle F. Tell John Fairtree to bring a light wagon here right away!"

Sharon ran to Brannigan's Morgan horse.

Brannigan went back to the injured man. He felt the ribs, and shook his head. Junior had been kicked viciously after he was down, and several ribs had been broken. Though the light was fading, Brannigan began to search the ground for sign. He found the imprint of hoofs from three horses. Only two sets led out of the wallow.

Brannigan untied the 2 B horse and rode out of the wallow, back-tracking the sign. At the deserted sheep camp he dismounted and began to read sign like an Indian tracker as he reconstructed the crime.

He found the marks of five men, and each boot track was different. He whistled softly as he stared at one pair of boot tracks. They had been made by a brute of a man, a man well above six feet, judging by the length of the natural stride.

"Must be a giant," Brannigan muttered, and his eyes narrowed with anger. "And Jasper Jenkins was in on this deal. I'd know the marks of those hand-made boots anywhere. He's got a 'J' studded in both heels with tacks. But I'd like to meet the big ape who wears those size sixteen flat-heeled boots!"

Brannigan studied the wagon tracks leading off to the east. He counted the prints of four shod horses which followed the wagon, but made no move to follow. The long early summer twilight was giving way to the deeper shadows of night.

Brannigan rode back to the wallow, took his place beside the unconscious cowboy. He had washed the dried blood from young Brodie's face when Sharon came racing into the wallow with John Fairtree, and big Olaf Pederson.

"The wagon is coming, Brannigan," Fairtree said in a hushed voice. "How's young Brodie?"

"Still unconscious," Brannigan answered bitterly. "When I find the man who did this, I'm going to kill him with my bare hands!"

Gone was the peaceful content of the last few weeks. Now Brannigan's fighting face was hard and savage, and a strange fire smoldered in his eyes. Sharon stared at him as though seeing a stranger, but the look of terror left her face when Brannigan knelt beside Junior and gently smoothed the cowboy's dark hair.

"First and last, I'm a cow man," Brannigan muttered. "This boy didn't have a chance. I'll square for him, so help me!"

"Ma is coming with Clint in the wagon," John Fairtree said. "The nearest hospital is over at Tulsa, and the closest doctor is at Bass."

"He needs a doctor bad," Brannigan growled. "Whoever goes for the doc will have to ride through sheep country. I'd go, but I want to stay and do what I can for Junior when we get him back to the Circle F!"

"I'll go," Sharon volunteered. "I'll start as soon as we get Junior in bed!"

"You won't!" Brannigan contradicted. "You'll stay and help nurse your brother. Send Clint, Mr. Fairtree. He knows the short-cuts, and he's the best man with a six-shooter among all the settlers." He rose suddenly and faced John Fairtree "Is there a big ape working for Jenkins?" he demanded. "A giant of a man about six-feet-six, wieghing maybe two hundred and eighty pounds?"

JOHN FAIRTREE glanced at Olaf Pederson.

"He must be talking about Ram Scroggins," Fairtree said. "He runs a sheep camp for Jenkins, and he could kill a man with his bare hands!"

"And feet," Brannigan added. "Five men beat up Junior, and him dead drunk at the time!"

Sharon moaned, and Brannigan was at her side in a stride, his big arms around her.

"I'm sorry I talked with my mouth wide open, Sharon," he tried to soothe her.

Sharon Brodie buried her head on his shoulder. She pressed closer for comfort, and found it in the strong steady beat of his heart.

"Don't fret now, Sharon," Brannigan said softly. "We'll do what has to be done!"

Sharon nodded and turned away as Brannigan released her. Now she understood the basic philosophy of this man—doing what had to be done.

Clint Fairtree drove into the wallow with the light wagon. Ma Fairtree jumped lightly to the ground with a cry when she saw the inert, unconscious man.

"What can we do?" she asked Brannigan quietly.

Brannigan spoke slow and clearly. "I want half of you on one side, the rest on the other. Slide your hands under his body, and make a cradle. Don't lift until I give the word, then all lift together. Most of his ribs are cracked!"

And so it was done. Three on one side, three on the other, with six pairs of gentle hands cradling the injured man's body from head to heels. They raised him and laid him on the bed of quilts in the wagon, with Ma Fairtree and Sharon Brodie taking their places, one on each side.

"You drive, Olaf," Brannigan told the big Swede. "Clint will ride with me. I want to talk to him."

Clint didn't ask any questions. He mounted Pederson's horse and rode alongside Brannigan.

"I've picked you to ride to Bass for the doctor, Clint," Brannigan said, when they were out of the wallow, "because you've learned how to handle a six-shooter with the best."

A lump swelled up in Clint's throat at the rare praise of the man he admired most among all he knew.

"Thanks, pard," he said huskily. "I'll do my best, and I won't get to fighting my head like a fool yearling!"

"I'll ride out to meet you at daybreak," Brannigan promised. "Tell the doc that Junior has a skull fracture, a broken right jaw, and most of his ribs fractured. He'll know what to bring."

"I'll use my running horse," Clint said quietly. "He can eat up the miles, and keep it up all day."

"I'll send Ralph Brewster over to the Two B for Junior's mother," Brannigan said. "A sick boy always does better if his mother is close."

"He won't know it," Clint said slowly. "He might be out of his head for a week!"

"We ought to notify Buff Brodie, too," said Brannigan.

"You better send Sharon on that chore," Clint suggested. "Old Buff will still be hot about that fire."

When they rode ahead and into the Circle F yard, George Fairtree and his young wife, Rosemary, were waiting at the house. Brannigan told Clint to gear his running horse and get himself ready for the ride.

Clint went to his room and returned with his shell-studded gun-belt strapped about his lean hips. He fastened the tie-backs low around his right leg, twitched the heavy six-shooter like an expert, and hurried to the barn.

"You better fix him some sandwiches," Brannigan suggested to Rosemary. "He's riding to Bass for the doctor."

Clint raced out of the yard before the wagon had crossed the creek. Olaf Pederson tooled the wagon through the gate and drew up at the front door.

"We'll make a cradle as before," Brannigan said softly.

THEY raised Junior Brodie and carried him to a spare bedroom. Brannigan drew Sharon aside, tilted up her chin, and smiled down into her dark eyes.

"You'll take my horse," he said quietly. "I'm sending Ralph Brewster for your mother, but you better take the news to your dad. You are not too tired?"

"Are you tired?" Sharon asked. "Of course I'll go, Brannigan. You'll do what you can for Junior?"

"Everything I can, until the doc gets here," Brannigan promised, and kissed Sharon gently.

She clung to him for a brief moment, then hurried out to mount his Morgan horse. Ralph Brewster started for the Two B Ranch.

Ma Fairtree and Rosemary had undressed Junior and covered him with warm blankets. Brannigan sat down by the bed. He gently rolled one of young Brodie's eyelids back, stared for a moment, and shook his head.

"The dirty brutes," he muttered. "Cowboy, I swear I'll square up for what they did to you!"

His face was a savage mask of anger. The fine veins stood out on his high forehead, and his knuckles cracked when he clenched his big fists. He rose abruptly, left the room, and stood in the kitchen doorway, staring out into the starry night.

He turned slowly when a gentle hand touched his arm. Ma Fairtree was looking at him, but her eyes seemed to see through and beyond hm.

"Ride after Clint, Brannigan," she whispered hoarsely. "I can't tell you why, but I *know* he'll need your help!"

Brannigan leaned forward. "What do you feel, Ma?" he asked.

"Perhaps it was seeing Junior," she whispered. "But I seemed to see several big men doing the same thing to Clint. Ride at once, Brannigan!"

Brannigan did not stop to argue. George Fairtree told him to take his favorite mount, a full brother to the running horse Clint was riding.

"Ma is never wrong about her intuitions," George said heavily. "I'll get some of the other men and follow you!"

Brannigan hurried to the tie-rack, pulled the slip-knot, vaulted into the saddle of George's thoroughbred sorrel, and galloped from the Circle F yard. As he rode forward in the saddle to distribute his weight to the advantage of the eager racer he was remembering the other trip he had made to Bass, and to the Ben McCullough place with young Clint, when he had purchased the well rig. He remembered the night attack by the sheepherders, the fight in which young Clint had received his first scars of battle.

Brannigan recalled his more recent trip to Tulsa, and the meeting with Stratton who had been hired by Jasper Jenkins. Stratton had worked less than a day for his new boss. His saddle pards, Crag Trenton and Snake Holliday, had lived a day longer.

Now Junior Brodie had been almost beaten to death by Jenkins and his herders. Clint Fairtree was riding across enemy territory, and Ma had had a strong premonition of impending danger to him.

In a country where a horse so often meant the difference between life and death, a man thought first about the horse he was riding. Brannigan eased his pace, and some of his burning anger simmered down to a smoldering wrath, with the glowing embers banked by the ashes of self-control.

It was midnight when he rode into Bass. He had covered the forty miles in less than five hours, and had saved his horse for the hard trip back to the settlement. The little town seemed deserted, except for a glow of yellow light at the far end of the long dusty street.

John Fairtree had said that Dr. Simmons lived in a small house at the west end of the street. Brannigan saw a white picket fence in the eerie moonlight. He dismounted and tied his horse, hurried up the walk, and knocked on the front door.

"Who's there?" a woman's voice asked sharply.

"Brannigan, from the settlement. I want to see the doctor right away!"

The door opened. "You're the second one within an hour," the woman complained. "The doctor was called up to the Silver Dollar Saloon. I sent that other young fellow up there."

"Thanks, ma'am," Brannigan answered. "I'll get right on up there."

"Better not," the doctor's wife advised. "They've passed a new town law, and you can't wear a six-shooter in town!"

Brannigan was already climbing his saddle. When he drew rein about half a block from the garishly-lighted saloon he ran the remaining distance to the Silver Dollar.

CHAPTER XVI

No Quarter

EVEN before Brannigan reached the saloon, he heard the uproar. Men were shouting, and the sound of blows told of a terrible fight. Brannigan shouldered through the bat-wing doors and quickly placed his back against the wall.

He saw the broad back of a giant who was pumping blows at a man who was trying to defend himself from four attackers. Clint Fairtree, whose battered face told of a savage beating! The big man would be "Ram" Scroggins who had almost killed Junior Brodie.

Brannigan made a flying tackle and hit Scroggins with his left shoulder. The giant herder was slammed against a side wall as Brannigan caught his balance. Clint Fairtree was down on one knee with his forearms protecting his face, while three sheepherders piled on him.

Brannigan aimed a straight right at one burly herder. His fist caught the man behind the left ear, and the fellow dropped like a pole-axed steer. Brannigan caught the next man with both hands and hurled him across the saloon. Then he was in front of Clint.

The third sheepman grabbed a whisky bottle from the bar, broke it with one savage blow, and faced Brannigan with the broken bottle neck. Brannigan feinted with a left jab, and the herder rushed him. Brannigan went to one knee under the terrible weapon, caught the herder under the arms, shifted like a panther, catching the right arm as he turned. Then he bucked down savagely as he held the imprisoned arm.

The herder screamed as the bone in his arm snapped. Brannigan hammered a merciful blow to the point of the chin, and whirled to meet the man he had thrown across the saloon. He ducked under a chair the herder swung, then Brannigan had him. His fists thudded into the savage face, and a terrific right to the jaw dropped the man.

"Watch out, Brannigan!"

Brannigan heard Clint Fairtree's voice the instant before he saw Ram Scroggins moving in on him like a great shaggy grizzly. And he saw Jasper Jenkins standing at the bar, heard him shouting to Scroggins to kill Brannigan!

Brannigan's dark shirt was torn to ribbons, but there was not a mark on his face. He measured his chances with the advancing giant, and found none. Instead of waiting to be crushed, Brannigan leaped in to the attack.

Ram Scroggins' wide shoulders were hunched, his shaggy head down between his massive shoulders. He moved in like a Juggernaut, his huge hands taloned for a grip.

Brannigan landed lightly on the balls of his feet and slashed three blows at the bestial face. Then he danced to the other side and stepped in to meet the giant.

Brannigan felt the corded arms close about him, but he slithered out of the grip. His knee shot up and the giant lurched forward. Brannigan's left hand shot out with the fingers clawed. This was bar-room fighting with a vengeance, with no quarter asked or given. It was kill or be killed—and Junior Brodie needed a doctor!

Brannigan's fingers hooked in the piggish eyes of the giant herder. His hand came down hard to mash the bulbous nose with the most vicious mugging-blow known in rough-and-tumble. Then Brannigan was free from that crushing grip, and he hammered two savage blows to the point of the Scroggin's chin.

The giant was bleeding profusely, and one eye was closed. He was bellowing like a bull, but his huge head only rocked back under blows which would have felled an ordinary man.

From the corner of one eye, Brannigan saw Clint Fairtree stagger to his feet to

intercept Jasper Jenkins who was moving in fast. And Brannigan knew from Scroggins' shuffling advance that the giant was on the kill.

Brannigan leaped high into the air, lashing out with his right boot as he threw himself backward. The heel of his boot crashed against Scroggins' chin and brought a gasp.

The herder was swaying unsteadily when Brannigan rushed and landed a vicious left to the man's middle. As Scroggins doubled up, Brannigan started an uppercut from his boots, which exploded under the falling man's chin.

SCROGGINS crashed to the floor with a thud that shook the building. Brannigan leaped across the quivering hulk, but too late as he saw Jasper Jenkins fell Clint with a smashing right-hand blow, and bring back his sharp-toed boot to kick the cowboy in the head.

That boot never landed. Brannigan caught Jenkins with a left hook that spun the sheepman around. Brannigan followed through with a straight right that battered Jenkins to the floor, but the sheepman rolled and came up reaching for his holstered six-shooter. Brannigan knew he would never reach Jenkins in time to grab that gun-hand. And his own six-shooter was in his saddle-bag outside, in obedience to the law!

Brannigan threw himself to the floor just as Jenkins cleared leather. The sheepman's shot whistled over Brannigan's head, mising him by inches. Brannigan slapped for his right boot just as Jenkins eared back the hammer of his heavy six-shooter. Blinding light seemed to leap from Brannigan's fist, and Jasper Jenkins screamed as he fell to his knees with a .41 caliber slug in his stomach.

Brannigan cradled the two-shot "over-and-under" pistol in his bleeding fist as he faced the now quiet crowd. He saw a man at the fringe of the crowd jerk his arm, and triggered the hide-out gun again.

"You've shot the law!" the fat bartender shouted. "Carlos Lopez was Jenkins' man, but he was the town marshal!"

"You need a new one!" Brannigan retorted harshly. "Where's Doc Simmons?"

"Right here," a little man answered, and crawled out from under a card table.

"Get your horse!" Brannigan ordered sternly. "That big ape nearly killed Junior Brodie, and you've got to save him!"

"But I am needed here now," the little doctor objected. "I never saw such a shambles in all my days! And Scroggins isn't dead yet!"

Brannigan scooped up the six-shooter Jasper Jenkins had dropped. "I said get your horse, Doc!" he repeated. "You all right, Clint?"

Clint could barely see from either eye, but he nodded and grinned. "You saved me from being kicked to death, pard," he answered. "Make that fat bar-dog give me my gun. He held me under a sawed-off, and lifted my iron!"

"Hand that gun over the bar, handles first!" Brannigan ordered.

Clint took it and checked the loads. "Take doc out," he told Brannigan. "I'll keep the rest of these sheep-walkers honest until you're in the saddle!"

The pounding of hoofs came from the street, six men swung down from saddles and leaped into the saloon with pistols drawn. They slid to a stop when they saw Brannigan and Clint. Olaf Pederson, in the lead, stared at the wreckage, and the men on the sawdust-covered floor.

"Yumping Yiminy!" he whispered. "A twister must have hit this place!"

John Fairtree stared at the gasping Jasper Jenkins.

"Is he dead?" Fairtree asked.

"Naw, but he will be," Clint answered. "Brannigan shot him in the middle. He don't have a chance!"

"Get started with Dr. Simmons," Brannigan said sternly. "John and Olaf and I will catch you up."

As Clint left, Brannigan asked the fat bartender:

"Who's your boss?"

The bartender pointed to Jenkins. "He owned most of the town."

Jasper Jenkins screamed once and

straightened his long legs. Brannigan looked down on the mean, twisted face with no show of emotion.

"Let's go," he said to Fairtree. "I've kept my promise to square up for Junior!"

THEY left the saloon and walked outside to their horses. Brannigan slipped the small .41 caliber pistol into a special pocket built inside his right boot.

"That's what you might call an ace-in-the-hole," he said grimly. "They passed a new town law here, but it didn't apply to Jasper Jenkins. Let's head for home. But first, the livery barn. All these horses have come far and fast, and we'll have to grain them."

Brannigan roused up a sleepy hostler and gave the man a gold piece. An hour later they were riding across the prairie for Terrapin Valley.

The horses were leg-weary when the settlers rode into the Circle F. John Fairtree told the others to look after the horses and hurried to the house with Brannigan.

Ma Fairtree's eyes opened wide when she saw Brannigan with his shirt in ribbons, but before she could question him another anxious-eyed woman came from Junior's bedroom.

"Brannigan," Ma said, "this is Mrs. Brodie, Sharon's and Junior's mother."

"Thank you for what you did for my boy, Brannigan," Mrs. Brodie said. "The doctor is with him now. You've had trouble?"

"I kept my promise to Junior," Brannigan said gruffly.

He washed at the bench outside, put on a clean shirt, then went to the extra bedroom where Junior lay.

"Morning, Brannigan," Dr. Simmons greeted him brusquely. "He's still unconscious and will be for some time to come!"

Mrs. Brodie was sitting beside her son who was bandaged like a mummy. Brannigan looked down at him, turned abruptly and went back to the kitchen. Ma Fairtree followed to prepare breakfast.

"Sharon isn't back yet," she said. "Don't quarrel with her father when he gets here."

"I won't, Ma," Brannigan promised. "He's had trouble enough."

The other men had gone to bed, but Brannigan ate breakfast, rolled a cigarette, and smoked while Ma came and sat beside him.

"I don't know what any of us would have done without you, Brannigan," she said softly. "And Amy Brodie likes you."

"I'm glad," Brannigan said simply. "I like her, too."

Two horses came roaring into the yard, and Sharon Brodie and her father swung to the ground. Buff Brodie ran to the house. Ma Fairtree met him at the door.

"Where's Junior?" Brodie growled in a thick voice.

"In the spare bedroom," Ma answered. "Amy is with him. Go right in."

Brodie stared at Brannigan, growled something, and hurried to the bedroom. Sharon came in, went directly to Brannigan, and took both his hands.

"You had trouble," she said quietly. "You didn't get hurt?"

Brannigan shook his head. Sharon raised on tiptoes and kissed him, then hurried to Junior's room. Brannigan followed her and stood in the doorway.

Buff Brodie was staring down at his son, his lips twisting as he studied the heavy bandages. He asked Dr. Simmons a question.

"Will he—live?"

"I've done all I can," the doctor answered. "The rest is up to his Maker. You owe a debt to Brannigan. A few hours more, and it would have been too late!"

"He started all this here in the valley!" Brodie accused harshly. "I don't owe him a thing!"

Brannigan went back to his chair at the table. Ma poured him another cup of coffee, and Brannigan retreated within the shell of reserve which had started to soften.

"Think nothing of Buff Brodie's remarks, Brannigan," Ma Fairtree said. "He's a proud man who has always had

his way. He'll get over it in time."

Brannigan shrugged. Ma tried again. "You will try to be friends with him?" she asked hopefully.

Brannigan shook his head. "I never force my friendship on any one," he said. "Brodie and I have lived a long time without each other. I can live that much longer the same way!"

Sharon came out and sat down beside Brannigan. Her left arm went around his shoulders. Ma Fairtree smiled. They were made for each other, she thought.

BUFF BRODIE came into the kitchen. He stopped abruptly.

"Have you no shame, girl?" he demanded.

"Have you no manners, Dad?" Sharon countered. "You were out on the prairie with the cattle and crew remember, when Junior was back here dying!"

"You can't kill a cowboy that easy!" Brodie barked. "I'm riding into Bass to take it to the Jenkins bunch."

"You won't find any," Clint said from the door of his room. "Jasper Jenkins is dead!"

"Who killed him?" Brodie demanded.

"They passed a new town law in Bass," Clint explained. "Every man was gun-naked except Jasper Jenkins and the town marshal. He was about to kick me to death, but Brannigan took a hand. When the smoke cleared away, Jenkins was down with a slug in his middle!"

"I thought you said all hands were gun-naked except Jenkins and the town marshal?" Brodie barked, a scoffing note in his voice.

"Brannigan had the difference in his boot," Clint said. "I rode in after the doc, and they had me down when Brannigan took a hand." He ended angrily: "Why don't you try to get along with folks, you old mossy-head?"

Ma Fairtree did not interfere. Clint had proved his maturity. Buff Brodie turned his attention to Brannigan.

"So you were settling a score of your own!" he blustered.

"I'm a cowman," Brannigan answered with dignity. "Junior is a cowman, and Sharon is cow folks. You don't owe me a thing, Mr. Brodie!"

"You forced me to drive my stock to the mountain range," Brodie snarled. "You took the water from the creek, and you burned off my grass!"

"You know Junior started that fire, Dad," Sharon interrupted.

"You light a shuck for home!" Brodie shouted.

"There's a sick man in this house, Father," Sharon said. "Please try to remember."

"Don't you tell me what to do!" Brodie shouted, and his wife came into the kitchen.

"That will do, Buff!" she said sternly. "You forget yourself. These people have done all they could to help us, and you take a poor way to show your thanks!"

Buff Brodie's shoulders sagged. "I'm sorry, Mrs. Fairtree," he murmured. "I'll get out with my crew."

He stomped from the house, and mounted his horse.

Brannigan excused himself and also left the house. He walked to the big reservoir and stood looking down at the water. There, at least, was one good thing he had done. It soothed his troubled spirit just to realize it.

CHAPTER XVII

A Deal Is Made

LEAVING the reservoir, Brannigan walked to his own land where the big earthen tank had been constructed. George Fairtree was diverting water from one of the gates into a wide ditch, and Brannigan could see the water traveling toward the thirsty land where the homesteaders had dug other ditches to carry the precious water to their crops.

The Gary place, which some of the settlers were now calling the Brannigan place, had been planted to barley and oats. Brannigan was planning the right location for building his feed lots. Unconsciously he turned to face the Strip, and saw Sharon Brodie walking along outside the double fences. He hastened to join her.

"I won't sell," she greeted him.

"Did I ask you to?" Brannigan said.

"You were thinking about it again," Sharon accused with a confident smile. "Oh, I know you've been planning where to put the feed lots, and how to run the water to them."

Brannigan shook his head. "A man can't even think around you women-folks," he admitted. "But of course you couldn't finish your own steers in the Strip without water."

"Which I am willing to buy from you," Sharon offered.

Brannigan again shook his head. "How about a trade? There's twice as much land in the Wedge as you hold in the Strip. I'll trade you even, and we'll both be connected with our own land."

"The Wedge wouldn't be worth much without water," Sharon argued.

"I'm moving the well rig over to the Wedge tomorrow," Brannigan announced. "If the Two B had the Wedge, with a deep well, they could water all their stock no matter what happened to Terrapin Creek."

"That would make trouble with my father," Sharon said coldly.

"Buff Brodie will have to buy more land in time," Brannigan answered lightly. "and he'll have to have water. If you owned the Wedge, your father would have to make a deal with you."

"You want *me* to carry on the fight with my father?" Sharon asked bluntly.

"No, Sharon," he assured the girl. "I won't fight with Buff Brodie, either, unless he brings it to me."

"I won't trade the Strip, Oscar," Sharon said stubbornly.

"Don't call me Oscar!" Brannigan barked and stalked rapidly away.

"I'm sorry, Brannigan," Sharon called after him.

Brannigan did not turn. When he reached the Circle F house, John Fairtree was just leaving the kitchen.

"I'd like for Clint to help me move the rig tomorrow," Brannigan said abruptly. "I'm going to drill a deep well on the Wedge!"

"Clint and I will both help you move the rig over," Fairtree said. "You going to make a deal with Brodie?"

"If I can," Brannigan said. "Anyway, drilling that well will give me something to do till it's time to finish the shipping beef."

During the following week Brannigan worked all the daylight hours in the Wedge. He and Sharon were polite to each other when they met in the Fairtree house, and the two older women took that knowingly.

"Junior regained consciousness today," Mrs. Brodie told Brannigan at the end of the week, and her eyes clouded. "He didn't know me."

"The doctor says the shock made him forget," Ma Fairtree said. "Junior has amnesia."

"Could I see him?" Brannigan murmured.

"Go right in," Mrs. Brodie told him.

When Brannigan entered the sick room Sharon was seated beside the bed, and Junior's eyes were open. He stared at Brannigan who took one hand and hunkered down on his boot-heels.

"How are you feeling, Junior?" he asked gently.

"Junior? Who is Junior?"

"He doesn't remember," Sharon whispered, and her eyes were filled with tears.

"But he will," Brannigan assured her. "We'll think of something to make him remember."

Sharon groped for his hand, and he returned the pressure comfortingly.

"Where am I?" the sick young man asked. "I can hardly breathe."

"You had some ribs cracked, cowboy," Brannigan answered. "Just take it easy

and rest. We'll have you back in the saddle in another month."

Junior Brodie wrinkled his forehead. "Cowboy?" he repeated. "Yeah, I was a hand on the Two B outfit. What's your name, stranger?"

"Brannigan."

"You must be new in these parts," Junior said.

BRANNIGAN got up and motioned with his head for Sharon to follow him. Just outside the door, he suggested:

"Tell him about Terrapin Valley and the Two B. His memory is coming back, and you can help him by reminding him of familiar places and people."

Sharon nodded, and then Brannigan's arms went about her. With a glad little cry, she buried her face in the hollow of his shoulder.

"I love you," Brannigan said softly. "I love you more than I can say!"

Sharon raised her lips to his. Ma Fairtree, coming from the kitchen, took a hasty glance, and retreated immediately.

"And I love you, Brannigan," Sharon whispered. "I'll meet you at the reservoir tonight."

Brannigan went back to the kitchen, trying to appear at ease. He glanced at Ma Fairtree and Mrs. Brodie, but they did not turn until he spoke.

"I talked to Junior," he said. "He remembers working as a cowboy on the Two B. He will get well much faster now."

"Is that all?" Ma Fairtree asked.

Brannigan looked at her, put his arms around her and kissed her cheek.

"Go on and read my mind," he said lightly, but his tanned face was flushed.

"I'm here," Mrs. Brodie reminded.

Brannigan drew away, stared at her, then gathered her in his strong arms.

"I love you too," he whispered. "I love you like a mother!"

She kissed him and Brannigan flushed and backed away. He had to hurry back to work, he said.

"He's big and fine like you said, Mary," Mrs. Brodie said, and seemed happy herself. "I can't explain it, but I have a feeling that he'll be good for Junior."

"Brannigan has spent much time alone," Ma Fairtree said, "and he's learned to think things out. Fortunately for us."

Brannigan mounted his horse and rode across the creek to the Wedge where the well rig was set up. Clint had a full head of steam up in the boiler. But when he spoke to Brannigan there was a doubtful expression in his gray eyes.

"I saw a Two B waddy riding around out yonder, Brannigan. He didn't come close, but I watched him through my field-glasses."

"It's free range, so far," Brannigan answered carelessly.

"Yeah, but that's sheep country," Clint argued. "I couldn't make this cowboy out, but he was straddling a Two B horse."

"Hm," said Brannigan. "And Buff Brodie has his crew working back in the mountains on summer range."

Brannigan set a sharpened tool in place on his string, tested the steam, and started the donkey engine. The drills were down a hundred feet, and little blasting had been necessary. Brannigan handled the throttle, lifted the string of tools high in the derrick, and let them drop. There was little conversation while the rig was in operation, and Clint joined Gustaf Pederson who also was helping Brannigan throw up the walls of a big earthen tank with horses and scrapers.

Brannigan liked the smell of the red earth, and the sweat of the laboring horses. The walls of the tank were rising ever higher, and taking form.

There was little water in the wide creekbed, and by August there would be none. Already huge boulders stood high and dry—rocks that had been covered by the once turbulent stream. Those rocks could be used later for a rip-rap to make a more permanent reservoir.

Brannigan stopped the engine and made a test of the drill. Now he had a trace of moisture, and he told himself that he should strike water within another week or ten days.

The long summer afternoon wore away, and at sunset the teamsters crossed the

creek with their horses. Brannigan worked for another half hour before he pulled his fire. Then he rode across the creek to the Circle F. He stripped his riding gear, fed his horse, and joined Clint and John Fairtree at the wash-bench.

AFTER he had changed his clothing he did not look like a homesteader when he joined the family at supper. He was wearing his cowboy rigging, with his shell-studded belt buckled around his lean hops.

"Howdy, cowboy," Mrs. Brodie greeted him with a smile. "You might be a sod-buster part of the time, but you'll always look like a cowhand."

"Thank you," Brannigan answered with a smile that changed his whole appearance. "I am a cowhand. I've got some fine range bulls up north that I'm going to ship down a bit later. It costs more money to feed scrub stock than good cattle, but good stuff feeds out and finishes better."

"I wish you could make Buff believe that," Mrs. Brodie said. "Junior was asking for you."

"Asking for me?" Brannigan repeated, surprised.

"He remembers about meeting those sheepmen," she whispered. "He remembers about big Ram Scroggins!"

"Does he remember who he is?" Brannigan asked.

She shook her head. "Not yet, but he will. That's what I'm afraid of."

"When he's able to ride," Brannigan said thoughtfully, "I'll ride with him."

He finished his supper, went to the sick-room, and sat down close to the injured man. Junior stared at him, obviously trying to remember. He started to speak suddenly.

"Five of those sheepers jumped me, Brannigan," he said in a low voice. "I knocked Jasper Jenkins down, and was doing all right until that big ape caught me in his arms!"

Junior shuddered at the memory. He closed his eyes and groaned. Brannigan gripped his hand.

"Ram Scroggins got what was coming to him, cowboy," he said quietly.

"You mean he's dead?" Junior whispered.

Brannigan shook his head. "He's still alive, but he won't bother you any more."

Junior smiled then, and his breathing became more normal. He didn't say anything, but Brannigan knew that Junior Brodie would never rest until he had evened the score with Ram Scroggins.

Junior was sleeping when his mother came in. Brannigan tiptoed away and went to the barn to saddle his horse. His rifle was in the saddle scabbard, and he checked the loads. The homesteaders were still keeping a nightly patrol, but the guard had been reduced to two men.

Brannigan rode to the reservoir and sat his horse on the high knoll which commanded a good view of the valley. A sickle moon furnished some light, and the fields of ripening grain waved gently in the cool breeze.

Finally a broad smile spread over his face as he saw Sharon riding to meet him.

"Evening, Sharon," he greeted, as she reined in near him. "I like to sit my saddle in the cool of the evening, after the day's work is done."

"Is the work ever done?" Sharon surprised him by asking.

"Would we be happy doing nothing?" Brannigan countered.

Sharon reached over and took his hand. Brannigan gripped her hand firmly, and they listened to the water spilling into the pipes and flowing down to the big earthen tank.

"Tell me again, Brannigan," Sharon whispered.

"I love you, Sharon," he said gently. "I have never loved another girl. I don't understand, but I like the feeling of loving you more than I do myself, or all the rest of the world!"

"Yes," Sharon said softly, "I feel the same way, and I can't understand, either. Nothing matters, except for you to be happy."

Brannigan slipped an arm about her

shoulders. "When will we be married?" he murmured.

"You are sure you want to marry Buff Brodie's daughter?" Sharon asked.

"It's you I love," Brannigan answered soberly. "I won't have to live with Buff Brodie."

"You'll like Dad when you know him better," Sharon said confidently. "He's stubborn and set in his ways, but once he makes a change, he goes all the way."

"So I'll meet him halfway and a little bit more," Brannigan promised. "After Junior gets well," Brannigan said in a low voice, "we'll have a big wedding, or slip off and hunt us up a parson."

"It would break Amy's heart, and Aunt Mary's, if we slipped off," Sharon said, with a smile. "They're making big plans."

"How did they know?" Brannigan demanded. "I just asked you."

Sharon laughed softly. "Stop and think, Brannigan. Did you ever have to tell Mary Fairtree anything really important?"

BRANNIGAN looked astonished.

"You mean they could read my face so easy?"

"They are not the only ones so gifted," Sharon said. "I could tell you why you are drilling that deep well over on the Wedge, but I won't spoil your surprise."

"Well, cut my cinchas," Brannigan muttered. "I did it to win an argument."

"So you have the Strip—with me," Sharon said. "Now what about that argument?"

Brannigan drew her to him.

"I see what you mean," he admitted. "It don't hold water now, but it will when I finish the deep well."

He stopped abruptly, leaned forward to stare across the creek, and reached for his rifle. Sharon sat up straight and followed the direction in which he was looking. A rider had appeared against the eastern skyline, riding toward the timbered Wedge.

"I'll be right back," Brannigan whispered. "Wait here!"

"I'll go along," Sharon answered, and they rode down from the knoll and along the double fences.

They crossed the nearly dry creek, climbed the steep bank, and entered the trees on the Wedge. Brannigan slid from his saddle and ground-tied his horse when he reached the west wall of the new earthen tank. He climbed up the bank and peered down into the hollow where the well rig was outline against the sky. Sharon joined him, and whispered just above her breath:

"Something is moving down there!"

Brannigan was staring into the darkness, with his rifle against his tanned cheek. Suddenly a match flamed near the well rig, and a man was outlined briefly. A firefly started to sputter. Brannigan squeezed off a shot, then was scrambling down the bank of the new tank.

Brannigan sprinted like a racer. That winking firefly meant that the intruder had lighted a fuse, but Brannigan could no longer see the sputtering. His six-shooter was in his right hand as he saw a huddled heap, and called sharply:

"Come out of there!"

For ten seconds he crouched and waited. Then he ran to the huddled heap as a rift in the scudding clouds allowed the pale light of the sickle moon to filter into the reservoir. He grasped the man by the collar and hauled the limp figure back. Then he saw why the fuse had stopped burning. He warned Sharon to keep away, but she was already at his side.

"Who is it?" she whispered. "Is he—dead?"

"Yes," Brannigan answered sternly. "Take a look at that horse yonder. It's branded with the Two B iron!"

"Turn him over," Sharon commanded. "I know every man on the Two B payroll!"

Brannigan flipped the dead man over on his back. Sharon leaned forward to stare at the sightless eyes.

"That's Juan Fuego," she said. "He was one of the Jenkins' sheepherders."

"I see it now, Sharon," Brannigan said, and his voice was husky. "This sheepherder stole a Two B horse to make it

look as though your father had blown up my rig!"

"But I saw the fuse sputtering," Sharon argued. "Then it must have gone out."

Brannigan leaned down and jerked a long piece of fuse. It had been fastened to some sticks of dynamite, and one end of the fuse was wet. Brannigan showed it to the girl.

"This Juan Fuego fell across the burning fuse," he told her. "My bullet took him in the left chest, and his blood put out the spark. He meant to blow up the well rig, but his plan failed!"

Sharon clutched at Brannigan's arm. "Do you think this could be the work of Ram Scroggins?" she asked in a whisper.

"Or it could be Jim Jenkins," Brannigan answered. "Undoubtedly this Fuego meant to leave the Two B horse here as evidence against old Buff, so he must have another horse staked out around here close. Let's have a look for it."

THEY LEFT the tank and returned to their horses. Brannigan mounted and took the lead, riding around to the east end of the tank. He crouched low in the saddle to scan the skyline, then rode into the timber. He was untying a horse when Sharon joined him moments later.

"It's that herder's horse, just as I thought," Brannigan told her. "And the thing to do now is to send the animal home. Most any horse will return to the place where it gets its grain."

Sharon shuddered. "I know," she said in a low voice. "You mean to tie Fuego on his saddle, slap the horse with your hat, and send him back where he came from."

"That's reading sign," Brannigan praised quietly, and he caught up the bridle reins.

Brannigan tied the mortal remains of Juan Fuego to the worn saddle. He led the burdened horse out of the new tank, slapped it across the rump with his hat, and watched as the animal loped away toward the east.

"I'll keep a watch down here from now on," he told Sharon. "Mustn't take chances, because I should strike deep water within another week. Let's get back to the Circle F before our folks begin to worry."

CHAPTER XVIII

The Brodie Well

MRS. BRODIE looked questioningly at Sharon as her daughter entered the big kitchen. Brannigan had taken the horses to the barn.

"We heard a rifle shot," Ma Fairtree said.

Sharon glanced at her mother who was embroidering a towel. Ma Fairtree was knitting.

"A man tried to blow up the well rig," Sharon told them. "We saw him."

"We?" her mother said casually. "You and Brannigan?"

"Yes," Sharon answered steadily. "We are going to be married after Junior gets well!"

"This *is* a surprise!" Ma Fairtree said heartily. "I'm so glad, Sharon!"

Sharon smiled. "It is not a surprise," she contradicted flatly. "You and Mother have known all along."

"Guilty!" her mother admitted and kissed Sharon tenderly. "But we *are* happy about it. . . . I wonder what Buff will say?" she murmured. "I mean about you and Brannigan."

Sharon went on into Junior's room without making a single comment about that.

Out in the barn, Brannigan was hanging the saddle he had just taken from the Two B horse on a stout peg. John Fairtree came into the barn with Clint, and Brannigan told them what had happened. Fumbling through the saddlebags, he brough out a crumpled paper.

"What does it say?" Clint asked curiously.

Brannigan read the scrawled note

aloud. "'Blow up the rig and burn the hay. B.B.'" He looked at John Fairtree with a grim smile. "Buff Brodie didn't write this, but the sheepmen wanted us to believe he did. I'd like to see the face of the man who sent Fuego when the fellow's horse comes into the sheep camp carrying the remains." He moved restlessly as though his thoughts were elsewhere. "I'm going up to the house," he said gruffly.

When he entered the kitchen, Mrs. Brodie was there alone. She greeted him with a smile and went on with her embroidery.

"Well, Mrs. Brodie," Brannigan asked softly, "what's the good word? I can read sign, too."

"Congratulations, son," she whispered. "I'm glad you and Sharon are going to wait until Junior is well. That will give Mary and me time to get ready for the wedding."

Ma Fairtree came in, marched over to him and kissed him.

"I am happy for you both, Brannigan," she told him earnestly.

"I wonder what Buff will say?" Mrs. Brodie murmured again. "He has such a temper, and it hasn't improved any since the fire."

"I think I'll turn in," Brannigan excused himself abruptly. "Got to be up early—got to get that well finished."

He went to his room and went to bed. Usually sleep came to him quickly, but this night was different. He thought about Buff Brodie and Junior, of Ram Scroggins and Jim Jenkins: And most of all he thought of the girl who had promised to be his wife.

Sleep came at last, and he slept soundly. He was up at day break, and Clint came in to tell him that all had been quiet during the night. Ma Fairtree was putting breakfast on the table when Sharon came into the kitchen with her mother. Her eyes were bright with happiness as she took a seat at the table next to Brannigan.

"Junior is much better," she whispered. "He even wants to get up and test his legs."

The meal was just about over when wheels were heard in the Circle F yard. Mrs. Brodie glanced through a window.

"It's Buff!" she announced. "In a buckboard!"

Buff Brodie appeared at the kitchen door and Ma Fairtree invited cordially:

"Come in and have some breakfast!"

"Thanks—I had my breakfast," Brodie snapped. "I've come to take my son back home."

"Is that wise?" his wife asked. "When Junior's ribs are healing so nicely?"

"I've taken enough favors because I couldn't help myself," Brodie muttered. "The place for Junior is in his own home!"

"But we enjoyed having you folks here," John Fairtree said heartily. "Better let the boy stay until he is healed."

"I've got a bed made on the buckboard," Brodie said stiffly. "How much do I owe you for your trouble?"

JOHN FAIRTREE'S face flushed with anger. He tried to control himself, but it was a losing battle.

"You don't owe me a damn thing, Brodie!" he barked. "I wanted your friendship, wanted to be a good neighbor. But you want to rule half of creation, and it won't work out that way!"

"Get the boy ready," Brodie told his wife, but she shook her head.

"I'm ashamed of you, Buff," she reproved. "You have always been generous, but you have never learned to accept generosity. Junior is in no condition for a long ride."

"Get him ready!" Brodie barked. "Or I'll carry him out in my arms!"

Brannigan had maintained a discreet silence. Now he pushed back his chair and got up.

"The doctor is coming this morning," he said. "The doctor is always the boss in a serious case. We must think of Junior now!"

Brodie whirled to Brannigan. "I've been waiting for you to put in your say!" he declared angrily. "I was doing all right until you rode into the valley looking for trouble!"

"I didn't bring the trouble," Brannigan

denied. "It was here long before I came to the valley."

"You bought the land I wanted," Brodie argued. "You drilled a deep well and emptied the creek. You set my grass on fire, and it's your fault my son is a cripple!"

"Stop fighting your head," Brannigan said, his eyes cold. "Getting mad won't help."

Buff Brodie tightened his jaw. "I'm taking my son if I have to kill you first!"

"It wouldn't be a fair shake for you to try," Brannigan said. "I'd like to earn your respect, sir!"

"I knew you'd dog it when you faced a better man!" Brodie shouted. "But you can't talk you way out of this! Stand aside!"

Only a dozen feet separated the two men who were much of a size. Buff Brodie's hand slapped down for his holstered six-shooter, but the weapon never cleared leather. For Brannigan took a quick step and gripped the rancher's wrist, forced the hand down hard until it jammed the .45 in the holster.

Brannigan vised down with all his strength on the captured wrist. Brodie gasped with pain, his arm dropped to his side, and Brannigan lifted the six-shooter and dropped it in a chair. Then he stepped back.

"I won't draw against you, Brodie," he said.

Buff Brodie leaped at him with both fists flailing. Brannigan picked the blows off in midair. When he made no attempt to strike the angry man, Brodie became more furious.

John Fairtree, recovered from his surprise, stepped behind Brodie and pinned the cattleman's arms to his sides.

"You are in my house, Brodie," Fairtree said sternly. "You have abused our hospitality, and you think only of yourself. You'd take Junior away if it killed him, to feed your own selfish pride!"

Brodie stopped struggling. His head lowered.

"I'm sorry," he murmured. "I'd give my life for Junior. I'd like to see him."

Sharon took her father's arm and led him to the sick room.

"Howdy," Junior greeted. "I know you. You're the boss of the Two B where I work. I'll be in shape in a couple of weeks, if my riding job is still open."

"He don't remember me," Buff Brodie whispered. "What will I tell him, Sharon?"

"Tell him his old job is waiting. He is much better now, thanks to Brannigan."

Brodie stiffened, then he remembered his temper—and his son.

"Your job is waiting, Junior," he said gently. "I've been thinking of making you ramrod when you can ride again. You'd like that?"

"You wouldn't hooraw a hand when he is down on bed-ground, would you?" Junior asked anxiously. "I'd sure like that job as foreman."

"Matter of fact," Brodie said gruffly, "I can't run the spread without you, so you just get well in a hurry. I'll come over and get you when the doc says you can travel."

"Thanks, Boss," Junior murmured. "I was worried about my job. And, Boss!"

"Yeah, Junior?"

"I'll never take another drink," Junior promised. "I want to make good as ramrod of the Two B outfit!"

BUFF BRODIE returned to the kitchen, walked up to John Fairtree, and offered his hand.

"I'm saying I'm sorry I came busting in here like a range bull on the prod," he apologized gruffly. "I'd have cold-cocked any man who did the same thing in my house. I'm plumb grateful for all you've done to help my chip!"

John Fairtree gripped the cattleman's hand hard. "Think nothing of it, Buff," he said heartily. "You'd do the same for mine."

Brodie faced Brannigan, but did not offer his hand. "I'm sorry I brought it to you, Brannigan," he said stiffly.

"Have you seen anything of the sheepmen?" John Fairtree asked.

The cattleman's face purpled with

anger. "If I do, I'll smoke my gun!" he said savagely. "Any particular reason for asking?"

Fairtree handed him the note Brannigan had found.

"A feller tried to do us some dirt last night. He was riding a Two B horse, and we found this in his saddle-bags."

Brodie read the note and raised his eyes to Brannigan.

"I didn't write this," he growled. "What was the name of this hombre you shot?"

"Juan Fuego," Brannigan said. "He was a sheepherder."

"I'll settle with Jenkins," Brodie promised, and turned to his wife. "We're working in the foothills of the Arbuckles, Amy. There's good grass and water, and the cattle are putting on some tallow."

Sharon kissed her father's leathery cheek. "I'll ride out and see you soon. Take good care of my cranky old dad."

"Cranky, is it?" Brodie repeated. "Mind your tongue when you speak to me, young lady!"

Then his eyes twinkled as he put his arms around her, kissed her, and hurried from the house.

"Thanks for holding your temper, son," Mrs. Brodie said to Brannigan. "You'll like Buff when you and he get to know each other better."

"I like him now," Brannigan surprised her by saying. "He won't back up a step, even when he is outnumbered and outgunned. He don't know the meaning of fear, and that's a man!"

The sun was just breaking over the rim of the eastern mountains when Brannigan rode into the Wedge and started a fire under the boiler of the donkey engine.

Gustaf Pederson and his father were already working in the hollowed tank which would catch the water. Brannigan could see other homesteaders getting ready to harvest their grain. He no longer felt the impelling urge to travel to the next far hill, and then to the next.

Soon as the warm days passed, the drills were biting deep in the wet sand. The tank walls were growing higher, and the water in the creek becoming lower. Then the day came when Brannigan announced at the breakfast table that he was ready to blow in the well. The derrick and engine had been moved, and Clint was jealously guarding a small metal cylinder containing the nitroglycerine.

After breakfast, Clyde Ferris came over to help with the explosives, and again homesteaders gathered on the rim of the earthen tank. The cylinder was lowered carefully, and Brannigan made ready to drop his go-devil. The detonators had been attached, and Brannigan waved for the spectators to hunt cover.

Sharon, watching with her mother and Ma Fairtree from a grove of small trees, saw him lower the go-devil a few feet, loosen his hold on the line, and begin running toward them. He yelled for them to lie down flat.

A DULL, rattling explosion came faintly from the deep hole, followed, as with the first well, by a crackling and rumbling. Then the top of the casing was blown high into the air, and a rush of water geysered up, bringing mud and sand with it.

"There she blows!" Clyde Ferris shouted. "Yonder comes the Brodie well!

"What did he say?" Mrs. Brodie asked, eyes wide.

"He said the Brodie well!" Sharon cried to Brannigan. "What did he mean?"

"You can't raise cattle without water," Brannigan said. "Clyde talked with his big mouth wide open, but what he meant is that I'm going to sell or lease the well to Buff Brodie."

"You had that in mind all along!" Sharon accused. "Tell the truth and shame the devil, Brannigan!"

"I drilled the well, and now it's up to you and your mother." Brannigan grinned. "Buff Brodie is the only man I've ever met who has me partly bluffed."

"You afraid of Dad?" Sharon asked unbelievingly.

"Look, Sharon," Brannigan defended himself. "I can't fight him, and he outtalks me. It's goin' to be a dry year, he'll have to move his cattle down here for

feed and water, and there won't be any water in the creek!"

Brannigan narrowed his eyes and turned to John Fairtree.

"You went to Tulsa last week, John. Mind telling me why?"

"Well, I made arrangements for a car of cotton-seed for feed," the big homesteader answered hesitantly.

Brannigan looked at Mrs. Brodie. "Did he do any errands for you?"

She hesitated, and glanced at Ma Fairtree.

"Then you did buy some land on this side of Terrapin Creek," Brannigan said. "I hope you bought enough."

"I bought five thousand acres," Mrs. Brodie admitted. "John bought the land for me. I had some money of my own, and land is worth more than money right now. Buff will come to realize that. Only it will take him a little longer."

"We better be getting back to the house," Ma Fairtree suggested.

As she and Mrs. Brodie mounted and rode across the trickle of water in the creek, they left Brannigan staring at water bubbling from the well. A deep sense of satisfaction filled him as he observed his finished work.

CHAPTER XIX

Junior Comes Back

RED SUN set in the west, and a gentle breeze was coming from that direction. Sharon stood on a flat boulder behind Brannigan. She slipped her arms around him with her face close to his bronzed cheek. Brannigan did not move. He could feel the strong beat of Sharon's heart and the tenderness of her fingers as she ruffled his blond hair. At last she said quietly:

"This is showdown, Brannigan. What does the 'O' stand for in your name?"

Brannigan remained stone still, as though he were thinking deeply. Then he turned and studied Sharon's face.

"That's right, Sharon," he agreed. "I will have to give that name when we get a license. Promise not to tell, and not ever to call me by my first name?"

"Cross my heart and hope to turn into a sheepherder," Sharon promised solemnly.

"My father was an Irishman, as you must know," Brannigan said. "My mother was Norwegian, and her father's name was Ole Olson. She was beautiful and kind and lovely, but from the time I was knee-high to a small pony, I never could get over her naming a young Irishman Ole."

Sharon laughed softly as she hid her face against Brannigan's powerful shoulder. Brannigan waited for her to speak. She raised her head and laid her cheek against that of the silent, waiting man.

"Brannigan it is, cowboy," she said soberly. "It fits you like Brodie fits Dad."

The steel triangle began to talk frantically as someone at the Circle F house struck metal with an iron bar. Brannigan was instantly alert.

"Trouble!" he exclaimed. "Fork your saddle and let's get over there."

They ran to their horses and jumped into the saddles like relay riders. They made it a race to the big yard, slid the horses to a stop, and Brannigan dismounted running. John Fairtree was waiting at the tie-rail. He thrust a piece of paper at Brannigan.

"Read this!" he said sharply. "Junior is gone!"

The penciled writing read:

> Brannigan: I remember now. I was at the sheep camp. Ram Scroggins beat me up. Jasper Jenkins kicked me. Tell the boss I'll be ready for work tomorrow.
>
> Junior

"His six-shooter is missing, and that Two B horse is gone," John Fairtree said jerkily. "He don't know that Jasper Jenkins is dead, and Scroggins will kill him this time!"

"Saddle the racer for me," Brannigan ordered sharply, "while I change my boots. I'll take Clint with me."

He ran into the house and changed quickly. As he ran out of the kitchen a horse loped into the yard. Buff Brodie reined in and stared intently at his distracted wife and daughter.

"Something wrong?" he asked quickly.

Mrs. Brodie handed him Junior's note. As he read it, Brannigan spoke up.

"The three of us will ride to the sheep camp, Brodie—you and Clint and myself. A crowd would be fatal."

Buff Brodie nodded grimly. "You lead the fighting, cowboy. I take orders this time!"

The three of them roared out of the Circle F yard at a dead run. The horses slowed some to cross the creek, but once on higher ground, Brannigan mended the pace to a mile-eating lope.

"The light will last about an hour," he called. "We might get to that last sheep camp before dark!"

The long shadows of twilight were slanting down from the Arbuckle Mountains as they rode closer to the foothills. Buff Brodie had changed in some strange manner. He was like a man who has wrestled mightily with himself for a long time, and had finally found some answers.

As they slowed the pace to climb a short hill, he said quietly:

"I wonder how much Junior remembers."

"He remembers the sheep camp," Brannigan reminded. "He spoke of you as the boss. That means he don't remember he's Junior Brodie. But he remembers that Scroggins beat him up, so—"

"So he will start with Ram Scroggins," Brodie muttered. "And this time that big ape will kill him!"

"He won't!" Brannigan contradicted, his deep voice husky. "Junior's not drunk this time. He'll be usin' his head!"

THE HORSES topped the crest and stopped for a moment to blow. The land down ahead was crisscrossed by deep buffalo wallows. Brannigan cupped field-glasses to his eyes. After a brief study, he spoke abruptly.

"The wagon is about a mile and a half straight ahead. I saw a rider dipping into a deep wallow about a half-mile this side of it. Let's go!"

He hit his racer with the hooks and sent the fleet-footed horse across the prairie at a dead run. Clint was right behind him, with Buff Brodie slightly in the rear on his stocky cow-pony. Brannigan dipped into a deep wallow and slowed his horse to a gentle canter.

"We'll leave the horses here," he said tersely. "The wagon is just beyond the bend in this wallow. Don't make any fool plays. We've got to give Junior his chance!"

They tied their horses to juniper bushes and started through the wallow on foot. A minute later they came to the missing Two B horse, tied to a bush with a slip-knot for a fast getaway.

"His mind is working good," Brannigan whispered to Brodie. "He can't be more than five minutes ahead of us. Keep down below the rim, and if we jump the camp, spread out to scatter the target!"

A dog barked excitedly just ahead, and Brannigan crouched low and scuttled through the wallow at a run. At the end of the sink he crouched down behind a clump of creosote bush when a tall man stepped into the clear.

"*Quien es?*" a hoarse voice shouted. "Who is it?"

"Maybe it's a ghost," Junior's voice answered. "You unwashed sheep-walkers left me for dead. I've come back to haunt you, Ram Scroggins!"

Brannigan loosed his six-shooter and moved up fast. All eyes would be on Junior. Brannigan saw the wagon, and a fire for cooking. Ram Scroggins was standing by the blaze, and Junior was stalking slowly toward him.

Buff Brodie came up behind Brannigan with his six-shooter in his hand. There were two herders out on the prairie, but Scroggins seemed alone in the camp.

"You beat me up, you big ape!" Junior accused hoarsely. "I'm going to kill you!"

Junior paused at the front of the wagon, his right hand poised above his holstered gun. A man's head and shoulders rose suddenly from the wagon seat and a long arm reached out and slapped viciously with a clubbed six-shooter. Junior dropped to the ground like a shot steer.

A six-shooter roared savagely behind Brannigan, and the man on the wagon seat was hammered back as Buff Brodie's slug caught him in the head. Brannigan, gun in hand, faced Ram Scroggins who was slapping for his holster. Scroggins saw Brannigan's gun, and stopped clawing for his own. Brannigan's boot shot out and kicked the pistol from the giant herder's holster.

"You kill boss!" Ram Scroggins said hoarsely.

"You beat up a cowboy when he was drunk and helpless!" Brannigan accused sternly. "I'm giving you the chance to do the same to me!"

Ram Scroggins leaped at Brannigan without warning. His huge hands were taloned as he clawed at Brannigan's face. Brannigan leaped back and to one side, but stepped back in again to jab lightning left jabs in the big herder's right eye.

"Watch those other herders!" he yelled at Clint.

Ram Scroggins lowered his shaggy head and rushed, his thick arms thrashing like flails. Brannigan stuck out his left boot, and Scroggins tripped and went to his hands and knees.

Brannigan jumped the fallen man as though Scroggins were a bucking horse, raking savagely with his spurs. Then Brannigan came to his feet as Scroggins tipped up with his dirty shirt in shreds.

The giant herder roared like a bull and rushed again with both arms swinging. Brannigan ducked under them, jabbed with swift rights and lefts, then stepped right into the giant's arms.

SCROGGINS was fighting blindly now, with both eyes almost closed. He grunted as he caught Brannigan in a bear grip. Brannigan twisted like a cat, caught the right arm with both hands, brought it over his shoulder, and bucked down as he jerked that huge arm forward.

Ram Scroggins flew through the murky dusk and thudded heavily to the ground. He crawled to his knees, but Brannigan was waiting, and stepped in behind a jolting straight right that exploded on the point of the giant's chin like the handle of a bull-whip on a pile of soggy hides.

Ram Scroggins' knees buckled, and he crashed with a thud. Brannigan whirled as hoof-beats announced the arrival of the out-riding herders. A six-shooter exploded from near the wagon. Junior Brodie was sitting braced against the wagon-tongue, smoking pistol in his right hand.

Junior jerked his head toward Ram Scroggins. The huge man was on his knees, swaying. A one-shot derringer dropped from his hand just before he lost his balance and crashed down on his broad back.

A gun roared from the darkness, and was answered by a blast from Clint Fairtree's six-shooter. A riderless horse charged across the camp. The remaining herder was outlined against the darkening sky, going away fast.

"Howdy, Brannigan," Junior's steady voice said clearly. "Thanks for taking up my fight. But tell him, Buff, he can't empty the creek with that deep well of his!"

"Steady, Buff," Brannigan warned. "He's taking up where he left off that night he was nearly killed!"

"Holster your gun, Junior," Buff Brodie said. "You've been sick for a long time!"

"Gwan!" Junior scoffed. "I've been hurt worse than this and still did a day's work!"

"Feel your head," Brannigan suggested. "Then feel your ribs!"

Junior raised a hand to his bandaged head, then felt gingerly of his ribs.

"Who in hell put me in this straightjacket?"

"You've been in bed more than a month, Junior," Brodie explained. "You didn't remember anything, but today you re-

membered about Ram Scroggins and rode over here. Brannigan and I followed you. You were taking it to Scroggins when some drygulcher on the wagon seat slapped you to sleep with his gun!"

"And it brought back his memory," Brannigan said. "Let's take a look at the gent on the wagon seat."

He took a hasty look and announced: "Jim Jenkins, and he's dead."

"This means shovel work," Brodie said gruffly. "We'll have to send men over in the morning to dig a trench." He turned to his son. "Brannigan saved your life, chip," he said sternly. "He took up your fight with Scroggins!"

"That makes us even," Brannigan said quickly. "Junior saved mine when Scroggins was ready to blast me with that hide-out gun!" He smiled at Junior and offered his hand. "I'm a cowman, too, Junior. You want to be friends from now on?"

As Junior hesitated, Buff Brodie seized Brannigan's hand.

"I want to be friends," he said, and spoke sharply to his son. "Shake hands with a better man, Junior!"

Junior Brodie took Brannigan's hand. Brannigan pulled the cowboy to his feet, and his arm went around Junior's shoulders to steady him. Suddenly Junior stiffened.

"Where's Jasper Jenkins?"

"Dead more than a month," his father said, and briefly told of the saloon ruckus when Jasper Jenkins had stopped a slug!

"And me laying there without any mind for more than a month," Junior groaned.

"Can you make the ride back to the Circle F?" Brannigan asked him.

Junior smiled crookedly. "I can make it, but I hurt like hell."

"Clint," Brannigan said, "run back and bring up the horses!"

When Brodie rode out of the wallow, leading Junior's horse, Brannigan bent his knees, caught Junior with a crotch-hold, and lifted him lightly to the saddle. And Junior weighed two hundred pounds.

"Let's get back to see Ma and Sharon!" Junior said.

CHAPTER XX

'O' Is for 'Old Folks'

DARK HAD come to the broad prairie land, lighted only by a bright star in the east. Mary Fairtree and Amy Brodie waited together at the tie-rail in front of the big Circle F barn. They spoke little, and then only in low fear-freighted voices.

"Junior has the temper of his father," Mrs. Brodie whispered. "But right now he has not Buff's logical mind."

Sharon came out of the darkness and spoke quietly.

"Riders coming from the creek, and they are not hurrying. That's a good sign, Mother."

They faced the open gate. Two horses came in fast and crossed the big yard. Junior Brodie was the first to leave his saddle. He took a quick step forward, then his mother was in his arms.

"Howdy, Amy," Junior said with the impudence of youth. "I've been a-missing you something terrible."

She held her son close. "I'm so glad you are back, Junior!" she said, and her voice was a happy song.

Ma Fairtree held Clint, and looked deep into his eyes. He answered her unspoken question.

"Every one is all right, Mother. Brannigan and old Buff are bringing up the drag, and those sheepers ain't going anywhere."

Brannigan rode across the yard and into the barn. He dismounted and started to strip his saddle gear. His hand stopped on the broad latigo strap when soft, rounded arms circled him.

"Thanks for everything, Brannigan," a musical voice whispered in his ear, and soft lips kissed his tanned cheek.

Brannigan turned slowly without breaking the encircling embrace. "Junior and I are friends," he said. "Old Buff says

he wants to be friends, too. I thought you'd want to know."

"Junior," Sharon whispered. "He remembers everything now?"

"Everything," Brannigan assured her in the velvety darkness and quickly told her of what had happened at the sheep camp.

"So Junior evened the score," Sharon said with a sigh. "Did you tell Dad—about us?"

"Not yet," Brannigan said uneasily. "I thought perhaps we would let your mother tell him."

With a little chuckle Sharon said, "Brannigan is getting soft and human. I like you better this way."

"The fighting is done, Sharon," he said, his voice low. "The real work is just beginning, and so is—life."

"Are you sure you want to settle down now?" Sharon asked.

"As sure as time," Brannigan answered quietly. "I was searching for something, Sharon. Now I have found it—a brave new land, friends, and the girl I love."

"Sharon, where are you?" a voice called, and Junior stood framed in the big barn doorway.

"Coming, Junior," Sharon answered, and she ran to hug her brother. "Oh, how glad I am you're back!"

Junior grinned at her. "When is the wedding?"

Sharon frowned into his smiling face. "Who told you?" she demanded.

His grin broadened. "Am I going to be best man?"

"When you are well," Sharon answered.

"Well, I'm not feeling so good," Junior said in a weak voice. "It might take me months to get real well." He squeezed Sharon's hand in the darkness.

Brannigan came from a big box-stall and glared at him.

"You ain't a real cowhand," Brannigan said bitingly. "Or you'd be doing the work you get paid to do in less than two weeks!"

Junior coughed hollowly. "Pard," he said, "I'm only a shadow of the man I used to be. Can I lean on your arm, Sharon?"

"Sharon," Brannigan said roughly, "I'll carry this pindling little feller right into the house so all the folks can see what a Gentle Annie he is!"

He stooped and gripped Junior by the legs.

"You win, Brannigan!" Junior shouted. "I'll be making a hand on the Two B in less than two weeks, but don't go packing me in the house like a baby!"

"Two weeks it is, pard," Sharon said. "This is going to be good when you tell Dad."

"I'll have a talk with your mother," Brannigan muttered.

"Nuh-uh," Sharon negatived. "You'll have a talk with old man Buff Brodie."

"Let's get over to the house," Junior suggested. "I'm hungry."

"I'm not," Brannigan growled. "You folks go on. I've got to look at the gates in the reservoir."

"Coward," Sharon accused.

"I'll tell Ma Fairtree to save you a bait of hot grub," Junior promised.

BRANNIGAN heard them laughing as they left the barn. He piled the manger with prairie hay for his horse, and left the barn with dragging footsteps. He was heading for the reservoir when a gruff voice accosted him from a deep shadow.

"Just a minute, feller. What did you want to talk to me about?"

Brannigan stopped, recognizing the voice of Buff Brodie.

"Why—uh—nothing much, sir," he stammered.

"Gwan," Brodie growled. "You state your business, Brannigan!"

"It was about some land," Brannigan began hesitantly.

"You are lying!"

Brannigan stiffened, took a step toward Brodie, and stopped.

"That's right," he admitted reluctantly. "I love your daughter, Mr. Brodie, and I want to marry her!"

He lowered his head, waiting for the lightning to strike. He raised it when he heard Buff Brodie chuckle.

"Whyn't you say so?" Brodie asked. "When is the wedding?"

Brannigan gasped. "Y-you mean you have no objection, Buff?"

"Now that's some better," Brodie applauded. "Buff is my name, and it's what all my friends call me."

"Put 'er there, Buff!" Brannigan said, and his voice was humming with the old vibrancy.

Brodie shook hands and winced. "Not so damn hard!" he barked. "You don't know your own strength, cowboy," he chided. "Let's get back to the house and eat. I'm hungry enough to eat an old boot."

"So am I," Brannigan agreed. "After supper we can talk about that land I mentioned."

"It can wait," Brodie agreed.

They walked rapidly to the kitchen where Ma Fairtree motioned them to chairs. Brannigan sat down and began to eat with eyes on his plate.

"I thought you wasn't hungry," Junior tormented.

"Save your breath to blow your soup," Brannigan snapped.

"I never saw the time when Brannigan had to carry his appetite in a sling," Clint added his bit.

Brannigan glared at Clint, winked at Ma Fairtree, and said quietly:

"Sharon and I are going to be married two weeks from today!"

"Well!" Sharon gasped. "Isn't this romantic?"

"You want to make something out of it?" Brannigan asked. "I can count on old Buff to side me if you comical cusses gang up on a poor hungry cowboy!"

"That's telling 'em, son!" Buff Brodie seconded Brannigan. "Mary, please pass some more fried chicken!"

"We'll go to Tulsa and do some shopping, Sharon, Mrs. Brodie murmured. "You and Mary and me. So much to do, and only two weeks!"

"Never tasted better fried chicken in my life," Buff Brodie said. "How you doing, Junior?"

"I'm handicapped." Junior chuckled. "But wait till I shuck these bandages on my short ribs, and I'll give Brannigan a battle at the table."

Brannigan grinned with happiness. These were his people, and he was one of them.

"I never done better in all my born days," he stated. "You couldn't run me out of the valley with a twelve-foot bullwhip!"

When the meal was over, the men retreated to the big front room. John Fairtree loaded his old briar pipe with cut tight-twist, while Brannigan and Brodie rolled quirlies. Brodie flicked a match to flame with a thumb-nail, lighted his smoke, and blew out a fragrant cloud of smoke.

"About that land, Brannigan," he said. "Start talking, and I'll listen."

"You'll be moving your herds back to the creek range after the rains, if it rains," Brannigan said. "There ain't much water in the creek as you know. You'll be needing water, and I'll sell you the Wedge, and the deep well I brought in."

Brodie frowned. "For how much?" he asked bluntly.

"For what it cost me, plus the cost of drilling the well," Brannigan answered promptly.

"What are *your* plans, young feller?" Brodie asked.

"Cattle." Brannigan said enthusiastically. "I'll buy that land adjoining the Strip to the west. We'll put a big feed lot in the Strip, use the Gary place for grain and hay crops, and graze my Circle B stock on that new range."

BRODIE began to smile, a devilish sort of a grin. "'Never put off till tomorrow what you can do today'," he quoted. "Some other feller beat you to it. This other hombre sneaked into Tulsa and bought twenty-five hundred acres adjoinin' the Strip."

Brannigan's jaw dropped. "I meant to do it as soon as I had finished the well on the Wedge," he muttered.

"I learn quick," Buff Brodie boasted. "I wanted the Strip, then I wanted the

Wedge. I lost both because I was too slow in makin' up my mind, but I didn't lose out on that twenty-five hundred acres next to the Strip."

"I'll buy that from you, Buff," Brannigan offered eagerly. "That way I can keep all my stuff together under fence!"

Brodie frowned. "Never liked fences, but we'll all have to come to them," he muttered. "Tell you what I'll do, Brannigan. I'll make you a horse-trade. I'll trade you the twenty-five hundred acres for the Wedge, and the deep well!"

"You've bought yourself some land and water," Brannigan accepted instantly.

Brodie frowned again. "Here's where the squeeze-chute is used to dehorn me," he muttered. "How much do you want for that five thousand acres you bought on the other side of the creek?"

Brannigan appeared surprised. Mrs. Brodie, Sharon, and Ma Fairtree came in and sat down.

Brannigan sighed. "You've been straddled, Buff," he said. "You put off something until tomorrow you should have done the day before yesterday. I didn't get that land."

"You didn't?"

"Nuh-uh. It must have been some other smart buyer."

"I bought that land," John Fairtree spoke up, and puffed contentedly on his old briar.

Brodie sat up straight. "Name your price, neighbor," he said. "I'll double what you paid for it to keep my grazing land together."

"Well, you see, I bought that land for another feller," John Fairtree said.

"For Brannigan," Brodie guessed shrewdly.

"I didn't buy it for Brannigan," Fairtree contradicted. "But I'll tell you what I'll do, Buff. If you can make a deal with this other party, we homesteaders will plow some of that bottom land for you, put in grain and feeder crops, and only charge you for our time, our horses, and implements."

Brodie scratched his head. Then he sighed. "I was wondering how I'd get the sod turned," he admitted. "Like I said, I learn quick. Your feeder cattle are better than any I have, and I mean to improve my stock, and my methods of raisin' shippin' beef. Who is this far-sighted party who beat me to that land?"

"Party by the name of Amy Brodie," Fairtree said, with a broad smile. "Tell him, Amy, and drive a hard bargain!"

Buff Brodie stared at his wife. He glanced at Junior, and saw his son laughing at him. Then Buff Brodie's Irish temper boiled over.

"I'm out there fighting fire!" he shouted. "I'm out in the timber chousing my critters up on summer range. I got damn little sleep! So what happens while I'm earning a living? Them nearest and dearest to me sneak off with my money in their pockets, grab the land I need to stay in business, and leave me out on a limb!"

"Simmer down, my bucko," Amy Brodie soothed. "I bought that land with money my father left me. You might say I bought it for Junior. It's about time you and him went into partnership, so talk to him. And don't sit there glaring at me, old cowboy!"

Slowly Buff Brodie began to smile. He went to his wife and took her in his arms.

"Shure and you're the fairest colleen a man ever had, darling," he whispered, and kissed her heartily.

"Flattery won't buy you any land, laddie," she said. "Go on now, and do the needful!"

Buff Brodie grimaced wryly. He glared at Junior, who was rolling a cigarette.

"How about you and me being pards, Junior?" Buff asked. "You to do the hard riding, and me to do the buyin' and selling?"

"You mean it, Dad?" Junior shouted.

"Like your mother said, may her shadow never grow less," Brodie answered tenderly.

Junior got up and danced a little jig. "Mind your ribs, Junior," his mother warned.

"Am I happy?" Junior yelled. "Ramrod of the broke-down old Two B outfit!"

"Broke-down, is it?" Buff Brodie asked sharply. "'Tis a fine feed lot we'll be buildin' just across the creek in the Wedge. I had lots of time to think back there in the Arbuckles. One day I slipped into Tulsa to see about buying some land. I discovered my spouse had bought this land for me and Junior, so I says to meself: 'Buff, me bucko, you can take that money you meant to use for land, and buy some blooded cattle." He kissed his wife again.

Brannigan slapped his thigh, and laughed loudly.

"And may I ask what is so funny?" Mrs. Brodie asked suspiciously.

"I knew old Buff had the Injun sign on me, but how about the rest of you pilgrims?" Brannigan asked. "He sat back there in the hills and figured this thing all out, let us do all the work, buy the land, drill the well, and force Junior into a partnership. He's made a deal to have his land plowed and sowed, he used his own money to improve his herds, and we all fell in with his schemes. Junior, you've got the smartest partner in the valley!"

A knock sounded loudly at the front door. John Fairtree got up and opened the door. He stepped back with an invitation for the caller to enter.

"Come in, Marshal Morrow. What brings you down here at this time of night?"

"Law business," the stern-faced officer answered gruffly. "I have signed complaints against one Buff Brodie, his son, Junior, and a feller named O. Brannigan. The complaints were signed by Charley Jenkins, cousin to the Jenkins brothers, now deceased, and the sole heir to their sheep empire. The charge is the killin' of Jim Jenkins, and one Ram Scroggins!"

"We will appear for arraignment and trial, Marshal," Buff Brodie answered promptly. "Can we give bond for our appearances?"

Morrow turned to Brannigan. "State briefly what happened," he ordered.

Brannigan stated his case, and was corroborated by the Brodies, father and son. Jeff Morrow smiled grimly and at last sat down.

"You are under arrest, but I'll release all three of you on your own recognizance," he said judiciously. "There should be little trouble proving provocation and self-defense. You have the most witnesses, and the trial will be held in Tulsa in about a month."

"Charles Jenkins wasn't a witness," Buff Brodie said slowly. "He never did get within a quarter of a mile of the sheep wagon, and then he lit a shuck, going away fast. I got just glimpse enough of him to recognize him."

"He is going to buy five thousand acres of land, and string a fence on the west side," Morrow said with a smile. "That will keep the cattle and sheep apart, and every one should enjoy peace and prosperity, thanks to a gent who could see beyond the length of his nose. I mean the man Brannigan."

"Which he aims to get married and settle down," Buff Brodie told the marshal proudly. "Jeff, I want you to meet my future son-in-law, O. Brannigan!"

Marshal Morrow got up and shook hands with Brannigan, then with Sharon.

"I know you will both be happy," he said simply. "Now I've got to be rolling along. I'll let you know the date of the trial, and you prisoners be there!"

"We'll be there," Buff Brodie promised. "The women folks have some shopping to do in Tulsa."

"What about you, Brannigan?" the marshal asked.

"I'll be there with old Buff and my brother-in-law," Brannigan agreed.

Morrow paused in the doorway. "Tell me, Brannigan," he said, "what does the 'O' stand for in your name?"

"It could stand for 'Old Folks', but it don't," Brannigan answered brusquely. "Just call me—Brannigan!" • • •

NEXT ISSUE **DESERT OF THE DAMNED** A Novel of the Ripsnorting West by Cowboy Author NELSON C. NYE

FOUNDLING OF MUSKRAT COVE

George Miller swore that the first sheepman who set foot on his land would get a .30-30 calibre Christmas gift—in the brisket!

By L. D. GEUMLEK

WHEN he first heard the noise, old George Miller put down the ore samples and moved closer to the .30-30 rifle that rested across the rack of deer antlers. The sheriff's letter, stuck behind the rack, was a dimming white patch in the December dusk.

George listened intently, but he heard only his own wheezing breath and the snap of pitchy-pine in the little cookstove where the newly built fire was catching. The noise, he decided, had been only the wind. There were always voices in the wind. Lonely voices. Or threatening.

He lighted the kerosene lamp. The fish-tail of flame burned high on one side,

Miller touched the lamb, and an ancient anger boiled in him

smoking a black streak on the filmed chimney. Holding his gray beard back with one hand, he leaned over the lamp and blew out the light, then pinched the wick straight with grimy fingers and struck another match. As he fitted the chimney into place, he muttered, "Stinking damn sheep. Just let 'em set foot—I'll tell the damn sheriff—"

Muskrat Cove was his, and he was going to keep it. When he struck the big gold vein— He'd strike it, all right. If not today, then tomorrow. If not on one ledge, why then, on a higher. But he'd find it! And when he did, he didn't want anybody around.

"Thieves! Claim jumpers!" he spat the words.

Gib Bonner had put a herder with a band of sheep and a wagon just over the ridge, but they better not come any closer. He'd show them whether the cove was public domain or not. The first sheepman to walk into Muskrat Cove would be carried out feet first. He'd warned them.

It was because of this threat that the sheriff had written, saying that George could not keep people out of the cove and issuing his own warning of what would happen if old George carried out his threat.

As the room grew warmer, George removed his heavy plaid coat and hung it on a nail near the bunk, but he kept the brown leather vest over his gray woolen shirt. Dusty-white, his hair fell long behind his ears when he took off his fur-lined cap. Grease-shiny trousers sagged over his bony hips, and a broken white button at the waist gleamed faintly against the dark cloth.

From a flour sack on the wall, he took a slab of bacon and cut six slices. Frowning at the short end in his hand, he put three slices back in the sack with the uncut chunk. The bacon had to last three more days.

USUALLY he went to town on the fourth Friday of each month to pick up his pension check. He took his best ore samples to mail to Butte and bought a month's supply of food. This month, however, the Friday was too close to Christmas. It was earlier to eat less for a few days than to struggle against the crowd of shoppers; nor did he want to stand in line at the post office.

Ten years ago when he started prospecting, he had taken his ore to the assayer in town. The reports were always the same —"trace," "trace"—and finally he saw through the plot to discourage him from making a real strike.

Now the Butte assayers were in the plot, too. He sometimes suspected they weren't really testing his ore. They were merely looking at the tags and saying, "George Miller? Never heard of him. Can't be any good. Just mark it 'trace' and send it back." Or they were scheming, letting him think his samples were no good while they sneaked in to spy on him and find out where he was getting them.

So he wouldn't go to town during the holidays. People pushing and elbowing and snarling in the name of love and good will, and the minute his back was turned, sneaking in to take the cove.

The bacon slices were laid in a black burn-scaled skillet when George heard the noise again. There was no doubt this time. A sheep had *baa-ed* outside. Gib Bonner was moving in!

George pushed the skillet to the back of the stove and tiptoed to the gun rack. Holding the rifle in front of him, he opened the door and stood for a moment in the rectangle of yellow light so the intruder could see that he was armed. Then he stepped forward and closed the door behind him.

The wind was from the north. It was not blowing hard, but it dug with sharp claws under his leather vest.

Night had not closed in completely, and the earth was a charcoal drawing of black and gray—gray sky, gray earth, black skeletons of aspen and willow brush, with George's Model-T a black beast lurking beside the gray woodpile. George's breath was a gray mist over his beard.

He looked to the north where the black pines climbed thinly on the steep moun-

tainside up toward the high snows. It was this sheltering mountain that made Muskrat Cove so desirable, keeping it one of the few places where winter forage was not covered with deep snow.

Nothing moved in the shadowed landscape, but George heard again the flat, unhappy bleat. He edged around the south side of the cabin, holding his rifle ready.

In the faint light from the cabin window, he saw the ewe. Lying with her feet bunched and her back humped, the cause of her distress was obvious.

"Hey!" George shouted in outrage. "You can't do that here! This ain't no lambing shed."

He nudged her with the muzzle of the gun.

"Old fool!" he cried indignantly. "Go on home. Ain't you got no sense? You know this ain't the season. You can't lamb now."

The ewe blatted again. George knelt beside her and put his hand around the lamb's slippery head. In a few minutes, the lamb was born. George set it on its thin, knobby legs, but at once it sprawled on the frosty ground.

The ewe turned away, and George, remembering that a ewe recognized her young by scent, pushed the lamb up to her face. She broke away and galloped awkwardly into the brush.

"Hey, you no-good wooly!" he shouted. He ran after her, carrying the wet lamb, but he could not catch her. Stopping to pick up his rifle, he went back into the cabin, muttering angrily. He still held the lamb.

INSIDE the cabin, he looked at the lamb disgustedly, and took one step toward the door to throw it into the cold to die. He hesitated, finally put it on the floor and reached for the grimy hand towel that hung on a nail.

"Nuisance," he grumbled as he squatted on the floor to rub the birth-slimed lamb dry. "Why didn't you stay outside? Bothering me this way. Anything I hate, it's a sheep."

He poked more wood into the fire, then washed his hands in the little tin basin on a shelf beside the door. As he stood with his hands dripping, because now there was no towel, he scowled at the lamb, then wiped his hands across his shirt front.

George took the lid off the blue enamel coffeepot and looked in. It was a third full of wet grounds, so he poured a dipperful of cold water over them and placed the pot on the fire. He pushed the bacon skillet to a hot place on the stove and took four sourdough biscuits out of a wooden bread box. On the rickety table, he placed a tin plate, a wooden-handled knife and bent-tined fork, a handleless cup, a tin can full of sugar and a can of evaporated milk.

"Christmas day, now," he told the coffeepot, "we'll celebrate. We'll wash you out and start fresh."

The bacon fried and smoked. George scooped it to the tin plate and broke three eggs into the skillet. When they were crisped around the edges but still transparent at the yolks, he put them with the bacon and poured a cup of muddy coffee.

As he took the first bite, he saw the lamb scramble to its spindly legs, take a few teetering steps and fall down.

"Well, look who thinks he's a-walkin'," George said.

The lamb struggled again but did not stand up.

George left the eggs to congeal on the plate while he heated water in a battered teakettle. He gulped half his coffee and poured the rest back into the pot, rinsed the cup, then partly filled it with canned milk and warm water. Taking the lamb on his lap, he gave it the milk a few drops at a time from a teaspoon.

"Quit slobbering," he scolded. "Anything I can't stand it's a sheep, and a slobbering sheep at that. I'll get me a nipple when I go to town. Here! Swallow this or I'll bat you one!"

The lamb did not take all the milk, and George set the cup aside for a later feeding. He took a soiled woolen shirt from a pile of clothes in the corner, wrapped it around the lamb and put the bundle back of the stove.

When he returned to the table, there was no cup for his coffee. Grumbling, he

poured the sugar into the sack and used the tin can. The scalding coffee burned through the tin, and he glared accusingly at the lamb.

"See what you made me do? Burn myself."

George filled the stove with wood and closed the drafts at bedtime, but when he awakened after midnight, he knew by the chill on his face that the fire had burned out.

The splintery board floor was icy under his feet as he groped his way across the room. He found the lamb in the dark. It was out of the wrappings, and its legs were stretched as stiff as dead branches. George's hands shook as he fumbled along the shelf for the matchbox, but when he struck the first match, he saw the lamb move its head.

He cut splinters of kindling with his pocket knife and started a new fire, but while he waited for the heat to spread, he pulled a blanket off the bunk and wrapped it Indian fashion around his shoulders. Unbuttoning his heavy underwear, he held the lamb inside, next to his chest. At intervals he forced a few drops of milk and water down the animal's throat.

"Damn nuisance," he muttered. "Throw you out, that's what I'll do. Damn nuisance, that's all."

The lamb moved inside his shirt like the beating of his heart; its small hoofs scratched his skin. When he lay down again, he kept the lamb at his side under the blanket, and for the rest of the night dared only to doze.

DECEMBER 24 was a cold clear day. There was no wind or snow, but the sunshine was like a frost over the brown earth. The air was brittle and sharp.

"A good day for prospecting," George said, looking out the dusty, cobwebbed window, "but I reckon you'd kick off if I left you alone. Besides, I can't work when I lose sleep. You just remember that. I ain't so young I can stay up all night."

He fed the lamb again before he fixed his own breakfast of bacon, eggs and biscuits. Then he cleaned the cabin, sweeping carefully around the stove.

"Never mind," he apologized to the lamb for itself, "you couldn't expect to be born housebroke."

In the afternoon, he returned from chopping wood and heard the lamb *baaing* even before he opened the door.

"Missed me, huh?" Pulling off his mittens, he picked the lamb up. He could feel the throb of its life through the white wool in his horny fingers.

How long had it been, he wondered, since he had held anything alive? Fish, of course. Grouse and rabbits. But life had been draining from them. He had always held dead or dying things in the last years. Rocks, even glittering rocks, were dead.

"Time to eat." Cradling the lamb in his left arm, he started toward the table, remembered the milk can was empty, and went instead to the dynamite box nailed on the wall.

At first he could not believe there was no more milk. He moved the cans in the box, moved them again, peered at each label, half believing he had seen a milk can without recognizing it.

Tomorrow was Christmas. The lamb could not live forty-eight hours without food.

"Look, lamb," he placed it on the floor and knelt beside it, raising its chin with the knuckle of his crooked forefinger, "right from the start you never had a chance. You wasn't even supposed to be born now. You'da died anyway."

The lamb blinked. Its small triangle of mouth opened but no sound came.

"I can't get to town before the stores close. They won't open tomorrow. Christmas."

The lamb twisted away from his finger and nuzzled his hand.

"I know what you're a-thinking," George cried harshly, "and I ain't going to do it. If I go over to Bonner's sheepwagon—" He gestured at the sheriff's letter on the gun rack. "Look here, George Miller ain't one to ask a favor without returning one. If I went there to borrow

milk— You see what I'd have to do? You want this place overrun with sheep? You want some damn sheepherder filing on our claim before we get to town?"

An ancient anger boiled in him, anger at the faceless men whose plots, tenuous as wisps of smoke, surrounded him where he could not touch or fight them; anger at the solid earth that maliciously hid his rightful treasure; anger at his own frustrated years.

"Nobody's coming into this cove, you hear?" He jumped to his feet, shouting down at the lamb. He strode across the cabin and grabbed the sheriff's letter. An uneven patter of small hoofs followed him. The lamb emitted a faint, quavering bleat.

George scowled as he pulled the letter from its envelope.

The lamb lifted its front feet, then kicked up its heels. With its tail swinging, it trotted a few steps and repeated the awkward little kick.

"Well!" The letter crackled in George's hand as he bent over. "Playing, huh? Can you beat that?"

The lamb tried to gambol once more and bumped George's leg.

HALF an hour later, George reached the canvas covered sheepwagon over the ridge.

The herder who answered his hail was a man George knew by sight and reputation, a red-headed giant called Matt, who was good-natured as long as he was sober.

"Howdy! Come on in," Matt invited cordially.

Hesitantly George went through the narrow door above the wagon tongue. There was hardly room in the wagon for him and Matt at the same time.

"One of your ewes lambed out over to my place last night," George said.

"Yeah?" Matt's bushy red brows went up. "Buck got loose last year, I guess. Accidents will happen, and I ain't gonna worry about it."

"Didn't think you would." George tugged at his beard with a mittened hand. "But I thought maybe I'd see what I can do. Piece of mutton might come in handy."

"Don't bother with it," the herder shrugged. "I'll give you all you want."

"Ruther raise my own," George scowled at his feet, "but I run out of milk. Maybe you could let me have a couple cans till I go to town."

"Sure, sure," Matt's voice was loud and cheerful.

"I'll pay for it when I get my check."

"Hell," Matt grimaced. "Old Man Bonner can afford it. Have some coffee?"

George started to refuse curtly, then the thought came to him that this was his chance to be crafty. He was in the enemy's camp. He was the spy this time.

"Yep. Believe I will."

He waited until he had the cup of coffee in his hand before he asked, "Ever do any prospecting?"

"Nope." Matt put the coffeepot back after filling his own cup. "I say let every man stick to his own business. Mine's sheep. I wouldn't know a piece of quartz from a—a pint." Matt guffawed and slapped his knee, spilling a little of his coffee. He repeated, "A quartz from a pints!"

George saw that he was expected to laugh and he did briefly. "I ain't found nothing yet that I'm sure of."

"Hope you strike it rich." Matt was not interested.

"You're about out of feed this side of the ridge, ain't you?" George stared at the steam curling up from his cup. He was walking on tricky ground.

He noticed that Matt hesitated before saying, "Oh, we ought to move in a week or so, I guess."

"I ain't one to take a favor without giving one," George said without looking up. "I reckon there won't be too much trouble if you graze over my way."

"That's fine," Matt's voice boomed again. "We won't get in your drinking water."

They did not mention the things they were both thinking of—the sheriff's letter and George's loaded rifle.

"Just don't like too many people around," George said.

"Don't blame you a damn bit," Matt nodded. "That's why I took this sheep-

herding job. Ain't too many people."

"Got to be careful of claim jumpers." George narrowed his eyes and studied Matt's face, but the herder did not change expression.

"If they try it," Matt said, "call on me and I'll help run 'em off. A claim jumper is no damn good and I'm big enough to let 'em know it."

"I'd of gone to town tomorrow," George said, "but stores will be closed. Christmas."

"Yup," Matt agreed. "Christmas."

"Don't mean a thing to me." George finished his coffee and put the cup aside.

"Christmas is for kids," Matt said. "Camp tender, he's got a raft of 'em. He come up this morning for a tree. I remember once, when I was a kid, my folks had a tree. Candles and every damn thing you can think of. I never forgot it." Matt opened the wagon door and spat a stream of tobacco juice across the steps.

"Damn foolishness." George tried to remember if he had ever had a Christmas tree, but there was only a faraway, faded picture of a long black stocking, lumpy with oranges and hard candy. He couldn't remember how old he'd been. It might even have belonged to some other boy.

"Camp tender brought up a pumpkin pie the old lady baked—" George knew Matt meant Mrs. Bonner— "and a chicken I'm gonna cook tomorrow. Why don't you come over?"

"I better not," George frowned.

"Aw, come on," Matt urged. "Feller ain't supposed to eat alone on Christmas." He opened a little cupboard and brought out a pie. "Here, have a piece now."

Cinnamon and ginger spiced the air, and moisture gathered in George's mouth. Matt cut the pie into halves, then cut again. He scooped up a quarter of pie with the knife and laid it on George's open palm.

"We'll finish it tomorrow," Matt said.

"Christmas don't mean nothing to me." George held the pie a moment, enjoying the smell before he tasted it. "But if you feel that way, I reckon I can spare you a little time."

THE evening shadows were thickening when George got back to the cabin. He was carrying a two-foot spruce he had cut with his pocket knife.

"Got some supper," he greeted the lamb. "Then I got a surprise for you."

As he fed the lamb. George talked. "That sheepherder ain't such a bad fellow. You and me and him, we can keep anybody out of the cove. Big fella, that Matt. Ain't curious about our claim, neither. Says he wouldn't know a quartz from a pints." George stopped to ponder Matt's joke, then shook his head.

After they had eaten, George fixed the Christmas tree. To make a standard, he gouged a hole in the back of a dynamite box—it would still serve as a chair after Christmas.

He got a hammer, rusty tin-shears and a small roll of badly kinked wire out of a toolbox under the bunk, then brought two cans from the dump outside the cabin. He pounded the cans flat, cut one large lopsided star and some smaller crescents, triangles and indefinable shapes. The star was wired to the top of the tree, but the smaller pieces set upright among the thick needles. Two white tallow candles that he had kept for emergencies were cut into smaller lengths and wired tipsily into place. A pile of ore samples and a can of milk beneath the branches were the Christmas gifts.

George lighted the candles and blew out the lamplight. The little tree was magic —the pieces of tin glittered in the candleglow; the star at the top shed a benign silvery radiance. The cookstove with its open grate like a row of red and black teeth, added a flickering warm light to the room.

George held the lamb in his lap and smoothed the nubbly wool on its back.

"You know what that star means?" Taking the lamb's head between his fingers, he turned its face to the shining tree. "Well, I'll tell you. Once, a long time ago and a long ways off from here, some shepherds was a-looking after their sheep —some of 'em was just little fellas like you—" • •

Unlucky Thirteen

The jailer thought Bill was bluffing

by Norman Renard

TO MOST of us, thirteen is just a superstition without foundation. But to Cherokee Bill it was a jinx that ruled his evil destiny.

Born Crawford Goldsby in Texas, on February 8, 1876, he was a mixture of bloods. His father was half Mexican, one-quarter Sioux and one-quarter white. His mother, one-quarter Cherokee and one-quarter white, was also half Negro. It seems, from his subsequent career, that he had inherited the worst traits of all those bloods.

At eighteen, he shot and killed his first victim, a man by the name of Lewis. That was in July, 1894. By November of that year, he had chalked up six robberies and twelve murders, including that of his brother-in-law. Twelve killings in less than six months!

Enter—13!

His reputation as a killer was now firmly established, and it was then that the first thirteen appeared in his life in the form of a reward—$1300 for his capture, dead or alive.

Early in 1895 his career as a badman

Like a wizard's curse, the ill-omened

13

brought nothing but trouble to gun-toting Cherokee Bill

was rudely interrupted. He was captured, tried and sentenced to death. The date set for his hanging was April 13!

But while jailed at Fort Smith, Ark., awaiting the death sentence to be carried out, he obtained a gun and ammunition which had been smuggled in by the wife of another prisoner.

Cunningly now, with that six-shooter filling his fist, he called the jailer, Larry Keating, over to his cage and ordered him to unlock the door.

Although the gun was pointed squarely at his middle, Keating somehow thought Bill was bluffing. And even if he wasn't, Keating must have reasoned, the gun was no good to a man locked securely behind bars. Keating, therefore, called his bluff and refused.

He lost, for Cherokee Bill, gobbling like a turkey-hen, shot him dead. This peculiar gobbling noise, which he uttered every time he shot to kill, was a death chant he had picked up from Territory Indians.

For the third time the fatal number had appeared in Bill's life. Keating was his thirteenth, but last, victim.

Guards came on the run and a sniping match followed. Miraculously, Cherokee Bill escaped without being reached by any of the guards' bullets. His position, however, was hopeless, and after some pleading on the part of a fellow prisoner, he was persuaded to give himself up.

13—13—13

During this gun battle, which took place on the 26th—or twice thirteen!—of the month, Cherokee Bill had fired thirteen shots.

He was tried once again for murder, this time for the killing of Keating. His trial, which lasted for thirteen hours, was presidered over by Judge Isaac C. Parker, who took thirteen minutes to charge the jury.

In exactly thirteen minutes, that august body returned with a verdict of guilty!

The spell of the unlucky thirteen was now broken, for Cherokee Bill was hanged on March 17, 1896 at Fort Smith, Arkansas.

He was just twenty years old.

? ARE YOU SUPERSTITIOUS

HERE are some common Western superstitions:

Stub your toe and you'll have bad luck. Kiss your thumb and ward it off.

Never look at a new moon through trees or brush.

A screech owl's cry near a house is bad luck for that house.

To see one buzzard is a sign of sorrow. Watch him out of sight to ward it off.

Sweep under a sick man's bunk and he'll never get up.

Hang up a snake with his belly to the sun and you'll get rain.

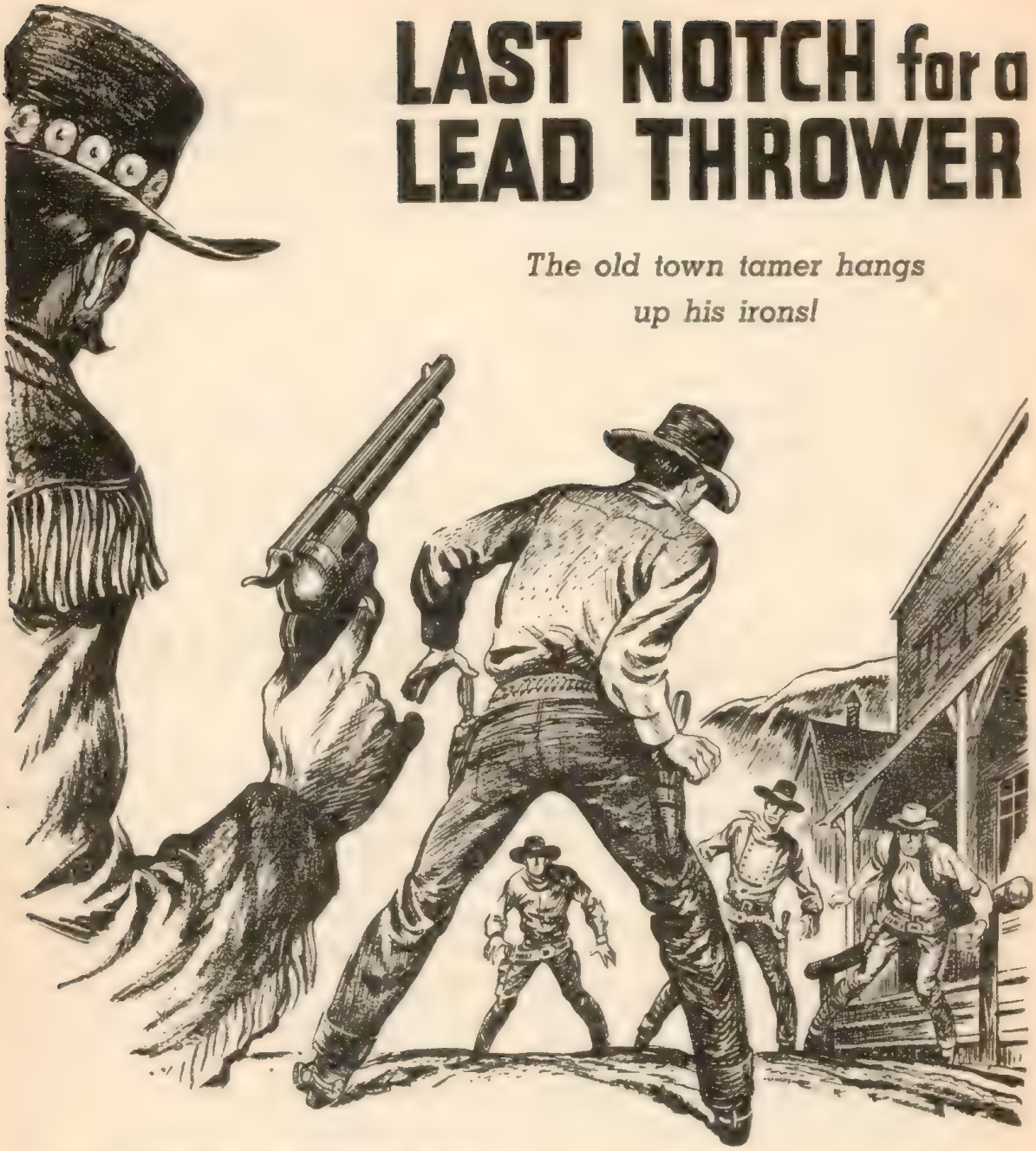
Burn the hair that comes out on your comb, or birds will build nests with it and you will go blind.

Tell a dream before breakfast and your luck will be good.

For a sore throat tie your old dirty sock around your neck at night.

LAST NOTCH for a LEAD THROWER

The old town tamer hangs up his irons!



by JAMES O. GOODWIN

THE STORM devil was on a mad rampage in the hills when the sound first came whispering out of the night. Great fingers of jagged flame were beating into the gnarled mesquite and buffalo grass.

Yet through the searing lightning and the skin-drenching cascade of chilling water, the sound persisted—ghostly and faint at first, then rising in a crescendo of unmistakeable sound.

Someone was riding full speed through the storm, shoving his mount through the pocked craglands with a recklessness that bespoke a cold scorn for sudden death.

The wildly threshing mountain wind caught the sound almost as though it had been waiting for it, blew it rapidly across

the craglands and hurled it against the blocky squareness of the Stackpole ranch.

The sound hesitated against the windowpane, then pushed into the room. It worked across to the pain-racked form of Uncle Ben Stackpole bulking under the covers on a hard bed.

The old man ceased fighting and cursing at the pain that gnawed in his lean middle. He reared his graying old head as high as agony from the bullet hole in his side would permit, and let his ears drink their fill of the sound. Slowly the pain washed from his weather warped old face. A hard smile pulled at the corners of his whitened lips. He nodded his head in cadence with the fast drumming hoofs far out in the blackness.

"Rath Hardy's whelp!" he whispered.

Minutes later, Lon Hardy hit the soggy ground in a dead run and slammed into the familiar little room. Anxiety was in his black eyes and grief twisted his features as he pulled off his dripping Stetson.

"I came as soon as I heard, Uncle Ben. Are you hurt bad?" His voice was as soft as a woman's.

Ben Stackpole eased slowly back on the pillow and grinned through the pain that racked his body. His eyes were fastened on the younger man.

"Doc Hanley dug the slug out. He said he reckoned I was too danged tough to die." A thin-veined hand snaked from beneath the covers and clamped on the strong young fingers. "It's good to see you son," he whispered. "All the pills that Doc stuffed into my gullet didn't do me half as much good as the sight of your face. Danged if you ain't growed to the spitting image of your Dad. Now you get out of them wet duds before you have to crawl in here with me."

LON HARDY was rubbing his lean firm muscled young body dry with a huck towel when the old man's voice cut in again.

"I reckon I know mainly why you come, boy. I'd hate to see you spill your blood because of me. Krug Madden is lightning fast with his iron."

The huck towel was crumpled in tense fingers. "I was under a peace bond back in Kansas, Uncle Ben," Lonnie said slowly. "I wouldn't have strapped my guns on again unless I intended using them." There was a mirthless smile. "I broke a promise to Iron Mike O'Conner, the town tamer, when I took up my guns again. I reckon I'd have to throw lead against him even if I backed down from Krug Madden. You've often said yourself that no man could ever challenge Iron Mike and live to brag about it."

Ben Stackpole's eyes closed and he breathed shallowly against the pain. "Iron Mike O'Conner," he whispered. "That name takes me back quite a ways, son. It's been a long time since I used to ride the trail with him."

The windows rattled rebelliously against the howl of the storm, and the old man shivered. "Just remember what I told you, son. Krug Madden is split lightning with a gun. He goaded me into making the first move." Uncle Ben shook his head solemnly. "I've never seen a man that was faster!"

There was bitterness in the smile that came to Lonnie's face. "I've never bragged of it much Uncle Ben," he said slowly, "but I guess there is one thing that I can thank my father for. I seem to have the heritage of the Hardys. Maybe I'll be fast enough."

The news came to Kirby City with the dawn and the clearing of the storm.

Lafe Stoneman, the old liveryman started it, and it worked through the town like an uncontrolled prairie fire:

"Rath Hardy's youngun has come back!"

There was more than mere words in Lafe's expression. There was an undercurrent of hope and eagerness. The red welt, where Krug Madden's gunsight had ripped viciously across his face, stood out like a scarlet snake on the brownness of his features.

"I heared it way in the midst of the night. Someone pushing a hoss fast through the craglands like all hell was

on his tail—riding just like old Rath used to do before some sneaking coyote who was afraid to face his gun shot him in the back."

When the news reached Judge John Kaney, he burdened a rebellious buckboard with his ponderous weight and drove out to the Stackpole ranch.

An air of sober worry came into the ranch house with him. He nodded stiffly toward Lonnie Hardy, then inquired solicitously as to the old man's health.

He came abruptly to the point. "You shouldn't have sent for him, Ben. It'll cause blood to run in the streets of Kirby City again!"

Ben Stackpole cursed at a brown paper that wouldn't remain still long enough to catch the scattering of tobacco that he spilled toward it.

"I didn't send for him John," he protested. "I didn't need to. I knowed as shore as grass grows upwards that Rath's whelp would come hell bent when he heard that I'd stopped one of Krug's bullets. Knowed it as well as I knowed that old Rath would have come if he'd still been alive."

The old man's bushy brows puckered above faded eyes. "Rath died with his head on my lap, you know, John. My last promise to him was that I'd look after Lonnie. I done the best I could." His body twitched against a sudden stab of pain. "Now I reckon it's me that needs looking after."

JUDGE KANEY bit the end from a cigar, then stuffed it nervously back into his pocket. "Damn it all Ben, you always had a soft spot for the wild ones in your heart. It'll get you in trouble one of these days. You were the only one in this country who stood up for Rath Hardy. Now you've raised his younker with a palm cupped to fit the butt of a gun."

Kaney shifted nervous eyes to make certain that Lonnie had stepped out of earshot on the verandah. "The honest folks in town branded the kid as an outlaw's son and run him out," he said quickly. "We don't need his kind here, Ben."

Ben Stackpole's lips tightened in anger. "If some of the so-called decent people had seen fit to stop reminding Lonnie that his dad had been an outlaw, and that as an outlaw's son, he didn't have no place to fit in, the kid wouldn't have learned to walk with his fingers hooked above his gun. You know damned well every gun-handy killer in the country was trying to take Lonnie's scalp before he was dry behind the ears. They wanted the notoriety that would come to them for wiping out the last of the Hardys."

Judge Kaney turned slowly and waddled out toward the buckboard. He shot a worried glance toward Lonnie Hardy. "We ain't got anything concrete to hold against you, Hardy," he warned. "It proved out that the man you shot needed shooting plenty bad. But remember this—if you make one wrong move, we're going to have to jail you."

Lonnie grinned sourly and nodded. "If going to jail was all the penalty that I'd have to pay, Judge, my worries would be over. There's a long-haired old marshal back in Kansas that'll probably have other ideas about how to handle me."

Fifty miles back along the trail to Kirby City, a dun mare plodded stodgily along under the weight of a straight-backed oldster who rode with an ease and patience that comes only to those who know from experience that to hurry is to invite disaster.

Iron Mike O'Conner had often said that the only time speed was really necessary was when a man was unleathering his gun. At any other time it was just a waste of energy.

O'Conner fingered a black cigar from the pocket of his fringed buckskin jacket and clamped it between his teeth. The twin guns that slapped his tapered thighs were as much a part of him as the long, rust-colored hair that fell about his stooped shoulders.

He let his eyes hawk over the trail ahead and nodded in silent satisfaction. It wasn't that Iron Mike thought anyone was lying in wait to bushwhack him from ambush. It was merely a habit born of years of

town taming in the curly wolf places like Dodge City, Abilene and Hays.

IN KIRBY CITY, there was only one man who was not disturbed by the news of the arrival of Lon Hardy.

Krug Madden leaned confidently back against the bar of his saloon and hooked his elbows on the polished mahogany. His sneering laugh revealed a set of even white teeth. Everything about the man spoke of a vanity that was as big as the cocksure conceit that walked with him wherever he went. Even the well balanced sixgun at his belt was weighted with gold inlay. There was no embellishment on the smooth worn butt. Madden liked the feel of sleek walnut against his palm when he did his killing.

He spoke with an ease and assurance born of many successful conquests. "I can beat any man that walks the earth with a gun," he said smugly. "But I'm not taking chances on anything going wrong. You and Lefty side me until we meet Hardy. As soon as he makes his play, we'll fan out and get him in a cross fire. There's a hundred dollars for the first man to bring him down."

Keeler Poggin loosened his gun and shrugged. "What about the townspeople? Won't they get their backs up if we gang him like that without giving him a chance?"

Lefty Brant poured raw whiskey into a water glass and tilted it. "The kid was run out for an outlaw, wasn't he? Besides, I hear he's tangled with that old range lion, Iron Mike O'Conner. If we shoot the kid down, we'll likely be doing O'Conner a favor."

Krug Madden let his elbows drop from the bartop. His eyes were flintlike. The laugh that bent his lips was mirthless. "Imagine me doing that long-haired Irish killer a favor."

Keeler Poggin's eyes widened. "You talk as though you know O'Conner, boss. Maybe you met him when you were up Abilene way?"

Madden's voice cracked like a flailing whiplash. "Button up your lip, Keeler," he snapped. "You talk too damned much for your own good."

Poggin shrank back. "No offense meant, Krug," he apologized. "I was just making talk. When do you expect the Hardy kid to show?"

Madden shrugged. "He'll probably stay out at the ranch for a couple of days to get the feel of things. We can expect him any time after that." His white teeth flashed. "I knew I'd have to kill Lon Hardy some day. When he left here two years ago he had a look that said he was coming back. I've had the feeling that he's been building his gun speed toward the day he thinks he's fast enough to cross irons with me."

Judge John Kaney was the first man to meet Lon Hardy when he rode silently into Kirby City two days later. The judge was backed by the town marshal and the local banker.

When Lonnie had racked his horse and slid into the dust of the street, Kaney spoke. "As a leading citizen of this town," he said, "and with the town's best interests at heart, I'm giving you a last warning, Hardy. Krug Madden isn't a very desirable citizen, but so far he *has* kept within the law. Your Uncle Ben got ringy over something that Madden said. Ben grabbed for his gun first, and Madden shot him fair and square."

The judge's fat jowls trembled. "There's two promises that I'd like to have from you, Hardy. One is that you won't cause any trouble unless Madden brings it to you. The other is that you won't so much as speak to my niece, Emily, while you're in town. Anything that might have passed between you and her is water under the bridge. We've got no use for any of Rath Hardy's blood in the Kaney family."

Lonnie Hardy blew a thin spiral of smoke into the air. A bitter smile warped his face. "The answer to the first," he said flatly, "is that I've ridden three hundred miles just to get a chance to put a slug from my gun where it'll do the most good for this town. The answer to the second is that you can go plumb to hell. Emily's a grown woman now. You've got no more

strings on her than you have on me."

FIVE miles out along the trail, at a peeled pole log tavern, the slipshod keeper and his wife were hustling about, frying a double order of ham and eggs for a buckskinned oldster whose bronze hair hung shoulder length, and whose eyes held the ghostly images of a West that was rapidly fading into peacefully fenced ranchlands.

The tavern keeper's watery eyes bulged with excitement. "Yes sir, Mr. O'Conner," he wheezed, "I knowed you the minute I set eyes on you. I was in Abilene one time when you brought three dead men in, all strapped across the back of the same lead hoss."

Iron Mike O'Conner had killed too many men to receive any comfort from the retelling of the tale. He swabbed the back of his hand across his sandy mustache and nodded toward the frying eggs.

"Flap 'em once over, but don't cook the yaller too hard." He shifted the big guns to better balance on the caned chair. "I've got one more notch to cut on my guns," he said philosophically, "and then I'm aiming to retire and raise me some hens myself. Always did have a weakness for eggs."

The keeper nodded silently. "When a man gets old, he sort of wants a permanent place to park his boots." Greasy fingers swabbed quickly at a burlap apron. "Not that you're getting old Mr. O'Conner," he corrected. "Gawsh-amighty no!"

Iron Mike O'Conner stretched at the trail kinks in his frame and chuckled. "I rode the Santa Fe into Dodge City in 1872 when she was the end of the line. I was forty-five then." He waved toward the sizzling ham. "That don't make me no younker, Mister. . . . Take up that ham afore it charcoals itself."

The tavern keeper's wife brought the plate and set it on a rough plank table. "Why don't you forget about killing this one last man," she asked. "We'd be some glad to have you for a neighbor. There's a homestead a few miles—"

Iron Mike's craggy head shook slowly. "There's a gent just ahead in Kirby City who's riled me. Leastwise, I think he's there. If he ain't, I've done a lot of riding for nothing. I've got a bullet marked for him!"

The man poured steaming coffee from a battered pot. "Some gent with a price on his head, maybe?" he asked. "Likely you're after a final stake to retire on, eh?"

Iron Mike's head moved slowly from side to side, making his bronze curls dance about hunched shoulders. "Matter of pride with me," he said grimly. "I never was much of a bounty hunter. It's just that once a man lives by his guns as long as I have, it sort of goes agin the grain to leave a score unsettled when he hangs 'em up. That's my only real reason for wanting to kill this one last man."

BACK in Kirby City, Lon Hardy was plugging the cylinders on his guns with fresh cartridges he had bought in the general merchandise store.

Emily Kaney found him standing, grim and tight-lipped, on the boardwalk. Her face tightened with emotion.

"It's been a long time, Lonnie," she said. "I'd hoped that you would came back earlier—and not with the intent to kill."

There was a deadness in Lon Hardy's eyes. "Your Uncle John named the reason for my not showing up before, Emily. It wouldn't do to have outlaw blood in the Kaney family."

The girl's fists clenched and her chin jutted. "Your father wasn't really an outlaw, Lonnie. I've heard Uncle John say as much himself. He admitted that if it hadn't been for your father's fast gun, Kirby City wouldn't have been a safe place to live in. Legally, your father may have stepped over the line to protect some of the weaker ones. But morally, he was just as good a man as Uncle John or anyone else!"

For just a moment there was a weakening of the iron-bound determination that Lonnie Hardy had built up in himself.

"I rode the straight trail out in Kansas, Emily," he said slowly. "I figured that some day I'd ride back to you with my head up."

Emily Kaney's eyes sparked. "It isn't too late yet, Lonnie. You don't have to meet Krug Madden. Uncle Ben Stackpole will live and things will smooth down." Her face sobered. "I know you've always felt that Madden was the one who killed your father, but you haven't any real proof." She took his hand eagerly. Hope burned in her words. "We could even go away, Lonnie, to some spot where we could forget it all?"

Lonnie Hardy shook his head hopelessly. "There's more than Krug Madden to deal with now, Emily. I broke a promise I'd made to Iron Mike O'Conner back in Kansas. I don't know why he had it in for me, but he made me strip my guns back there in his country.

"When I strapped them on again, I figure it was like throwing a challenge into his face. I've heard stories about Iron Mike since I was knee high to a colt. Ben Stackpole swears that Iron Mike never forgets an insult. Wherever we went, Iron Mike would probably hunt us down. He's the only man in the country that I'd be afraid to match guns with."

Emily lifted brown eyes that were wet with tears. "I'll be waiting and praying for you, Lonnie," she said simply. "When it's over with, come to me. I'm yours for the asking. Only please be careful."

She gave his hand a quick squeeze and turned and walked quickly away from him. . . .

The sun was making long shadows out of small bushes by the time the dun mare of Iron Mike O'Conner topped the little rise that looked down on Kirby City. Something about the somber quietness of the town warned him that here was a bombshell with the fuse sputtering quietly, ready at any moment to blow sky high.

He saw the little cluster of men gathered behind the old livery stable where they would be safely out of line of stray bullets. He noted the dead emptiness of the street that should be bustling with ranch wives and merchants and he frowned.

The age old call to duty sent a tingle down his spine. Like a keening breeze, he felt the call. The call that had come many times before. The pitiful, silent plea of the weak crying out for the protection of the steel-hearted old town tamer who could lay his healing hand on this village and restore to it its lost health.

He gigged the mare into a space-eating trot and loosened his guns in their worn holsters. He saw the sturdy buckboard dusting in from the opposite side of town and he saw the lone man stalking slowly to meet the three who were grouped before the saloon.

THERE was no thought of fear in the mind of Lonnie Hardy as step by step he drew closer to Krug Madden and his two gunmen. There was the realization that he was walking slowly to meet his death but no fear. He gave no thought at all to any chance of beating all three of the men before him.

He was a man standing on the brink of the grave with but one thought in his mind—the strong determinaton to take Krug Madden with him when he fell!

There was no worry as to his speed with a gun. Gunhandling came natural to the Hardys, and Rath Hardy's blood ran strong in his veins. He would be as fast now as he had ever been, possibly faster, but no man alive could beat three guns at one time.

Lonnie heard the gravel throwing slide of a stopping horse at his back, and risked a quick look to see who the newcomer was. A bitter smile worked over his face at sight of the buckskinned old figure with the long bronzed hair.

Deliberately he turned again to face Krug Madden. Iron Mike O'Conner would never shoot a man in the back. His score would have to be left unsettled.

The three gunmen before Lonnie began to fan out, edging apart so as to draw him into a deadly cross fire from which there could be no survival.

Krug Madden's white teeth flashed in a hated sneer. "Make your play any time, Hardy," he snarled. I'll kill you—"the saloon owner's face contorted—"just like I did your old man."

Lon Hardy leaned into perfect balance

on the balls of his feet. He released the cold, pent-up hatred that had been building in him for years.

"You're not scaring me, Madden. You're only giving me more reason to call on all the gun speed my dad left to me." His lips twitched into a hard smile. "There will be one difference this time. You'll be *facing* a Hardy, not shooting him in the back!"

While he was talking, Lonnie heard the measured crunch of boots behind him. A wild thought stabbed through his mind. Maybe Iron Mike O'Conner was going to put a slug between his shoulder blades, after all.

The old town tamer's voice slapped out commandingly. "Hold it Hardy. I've rode too far to be cheated out of my man now."

Lonnie dropped into a catlike crouch, and his eyes slitted. "You've got my back to shoot at, O'Conner," he gritted. "If Madden don't get me, you can divide what's left between yourself and his two gunhawks."

"Wait, kid," O'Conner pleaded, his voice edged with excitement. "You don't understand. It ain't you—"

Krug Madden made a little gurgling sound in his throat, and his hand flashed downward. His fingers clawed for the smooth walnut butt of his gun.

There was no wild fright about the movements of Lonnie Hardy. He drew in the same manner that he rode a horse—with a grim reckless disregard for death, and with a blinding speed that comes only to those few men who have inherited the ability to be complete master of a gun.

He felt the heavy bounce of the guns against his palms, and watched great, gaping holes spot the chest of Krug Madden. There was neither surprise nor elation at the realization that Madden's gun never cleared the leather.

He sensed heavy, drumming gunfire about his ears. His body tensed to accept the burning slugs that should be crashing into it from both sides.

INSTINCTIVELY, he twisted to throw a shot at Keeler Poggin on the left. Then he stayed his finger on the trigger.

Poggin was leaning forward, clutching his belly where a red welter of blood washed through his fingers. He went down on his face and lay still.

Lonnie spun toward Lefty Brant who had fanned out to the right.

Lefty was still standing, but his body was jerking crazily in cadence with the heavy roar that came from behind Lonnie Hardy.

Brant stood swaying, a man shot to death but still balancing on his feet.. All at once he folded at the middle and slumped into a lifeless heap.

Lonnie fought against the whirling maze that confused his mind. He turned slowly, deliberately, without trying to lift his gun, to face the man who stood spread-legged in the road behind him.

There was a roaring blaze of battle in the steely eyes of Iron Mike O'Conner. He stood carved against the fading light, a great picture of a great man. An old fire horse with nostrils aflare, still able to answer the clanging call to duty.

His clarion voice rang out clear and free as Lonnie half lifted his gun.

You'll Be Missing Plenty If You Don't Read

THE BANDIT AND THE LADY

Daigle was ugly—but the girl was blind!

by WILLIAM E. VANCE

It's only one of the many stories of the gun-toting Old West in the new

On Sale Now EXCITING WESTERN Only 20c!

"Hold 'er, buckaroo. You and me are playing on the same team. Leather your gun and let's drink to peace."

Several things happened at once then.

The old buckboard clattered up. Ben Stackpole with a tight bandage about his middle was sawing the reins.

Emily Kaney was suddenly at Lonnie's side, sobbing on his shoulder.

Judge John Kaney was blustering about, trying to cover up the relief that he felt at the sudden demise of Krug Madden.

The judge shook his head sadly. "I suppose we owe you a vote of thanks, Lonnie," he said brusquely, "but I'm afraid you'll have to face a jury. After all, Krug Madden was a citizen of this town."

There was a whistling snort from Iron Mike O'Conner, the town tamer. "Citizen, hell!" he roared. "Maybe you folks knew him as Krug Madden and respected him, but back in my district he was called Dandy Madden. He's wanted for robbery and murder. He's gunned at least three stage drivers to death." A sudden abashed grin worked over his seamed features. "Dandy Madden was one of the two men in the world I was afraid to throw iron against. He made me sing low and eat crow one time back in Abilene. I've just finished riding for three hundred miles to try and avenge that insult before I hung up my guns for good."

The grin faded. "I'd made brags about cutting one more big notch on my guns, a final notch for Dandy Madden. But between you and me, I was a little afraid that I couldn't hack 'er." He shot a feelingless glance toward the bodies of Lefty Brant and Keeler Poggin. "I reckon I'll have to be satisfied with two little notches."

Ben Stackpole sang out from the buckboard seat. "Howdy, Mike, you old coyote," he yelled. "It's been a long time since I've seen you, but if you're really ready to hang up your guns, I'd like somebody to set and play dominoes with me out at the ranch."

Ben's eyes went suggestively to where Lonnie Hardy had an arm about the waist of Emily Kaney. "I reckon we could leave the running of things to the younkers."

Iron Mike O'Conner slowly unbuckled his old guns and tossed them into the buckboard. He heaved a mighty sigh of relief.

"I said a while ago that there was another man besides Dandy Madden that I knew I couldn't beat with a gun." The marshal chuckled and nodded toward Lonnie Hardy. "Just to play safe, back in Kansas, I stripped him of his fangs to keep some damn fool accident from coming up that might bring me up against him." One browned hand went up to push the long hair back from his eyes. "I reckon I won't have to worry about him any more now. When a man gets married and puts his mind to raising a family, all of the gun lust goes out of him."

The old smile rode again to the front, and the town tamer's eyes twinkled. "Would you mind if I raised a few hens out at the ranch Ben? I always did have a strong hankering for eggs." ● ● ●

TEXAN'S PRAYER

Few prayers are more eloquent than the one which Jack Hays, noted Texas Ranger, is supposed to have delivered at Palo Alto. When confronted by a Mexican force far larger than his own, Hays uttered this plea to the heaven above:

"Almighty God, please be on our side if You can, but if You just can't, then for Jesus' sake, don't be on theirs. Just stand off over there on that hilltop and watch the damnedest fight You have ever seen."

—Katherine Bevis

MESSAGE for a BUCKSKIN MAN

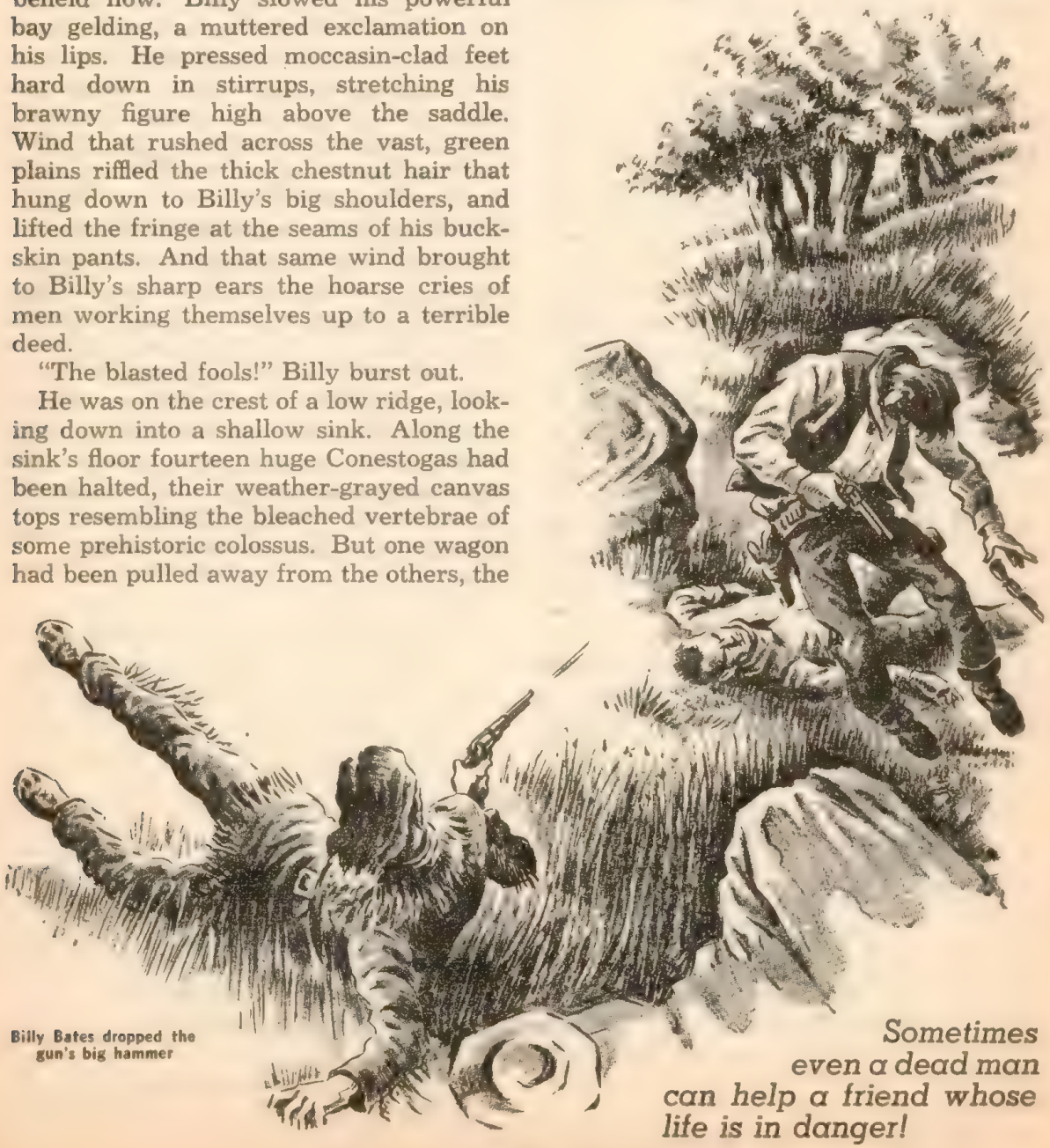
A New Adventure of Buffalo Billy Bates

By SCOTT CARLETON

THE tawny eyes of Buffalo Billy Bates had looked upon tragedy too many times to misread what they beheld now. Billy slowed his powerful bay gelding, a muttered exclamation on his lips. He pressed moccasin-clad feet hard down in stirrups, stretching his brawny figure high above the saddle. Wind that rushed across the vast, green plains riffled the thick chestnut hair that hung down to Billy's big shoulders, and lifted the fringe at the seams of his buckskin pants. And that same wind brought to Billy's sharp ears the hoarse cries of men working themselves up to a terrible deed.

"The blasted fools!" Billy burst out.

He was on the crest of a low ridge, looking down into a shallow sink. Along the sink's floor fourteen huge Conestogas had been halted, their weather-grayed canvas tops resembling the bleached vertebrae of some prehistoric colossus. But one wagon had been pulled away from the others, the teams unhitched, and the heavy tongue propped high. From the lifted end of the wagon tongue a rope hung down, noosed



Billy Bates dropped the gun's big hammer

Sometimes even a dead man can help a friend whose life is in danger!

about the coppery neck of an Indian buck. The Indian stood upon a tall box. Milling around him were almost thirty white men. Billy saw a red-maned giant of a man lay hands on the box upon which the Indian stood, and knew that the buck was about to die.

"Hold it, you fool!" Billy roared.

He was still too far away for his voice to have reached the tense group of men. But the big brass-bound Dragoon Colt pistol Billy hauled from holster had a voice that did carry to the men. Billy blasted the pistol empty, slanting the muzzle upward. He saw the red-haired man whirl, look towards him. The other whites turned, too, and Billy reloaded and holstered his Colt as he galloped in toward the wagons.

"I don't care what Alben Hadley says to me, Mother!" a woman's voice came suddenly from a big wagon. "That Indian boy was doing absolutely no damage at all. Alben has no business hanging the poor fellow."

"Susan, are you out of your mind?" another woman's voice lifted sharply. "You know how Alben is. He will ridicule and shame you before all those other men if you interfere."

"Let him!" Susan's clear voice replied.

SHE said more, although Billy Bates did not hear the words clearly, since he had ridden on past the wagon. The men ahead of him were eying him coldly. Billy's lips flattened down until his moustache, still silky because of his youthfulness, seemed to bristle.

"What do you people think you're doin'?" Billy asked sharply.

He centered his full attention on the red-haired giant who stood cursing in a sullen way. The big red-head's freckled face was flat-cheeked and marked by scars that indicated that he had mixed in a good many rough-and-tumble brawls. His eyes were small points of green fire under shaggy brows. Billy saw the fellow's hairy fists slide cap-and-ball pistols almost clear of holsters.

"Who are you, and what's the idea of you hornin' in here, buckskin feller?" the big man asked angrily.

"I'm Billy Bates, army scout, workin' under Buffalo Bill Cody, chief of scouts!" Billy returned crisply. "Do you fellows know what would happen to you and your whole party if you hanged this Indian?"

"A snoopin' scout, workin' with the Yanks!" the big red-head burst out. "Where's the troops you're guidin'?"

Billy Bates felt a strange sense of unease. The big red-head was running quick glances along the ridges above the sink. So were most of the other wagoneers. They had jumped to the conclusion that Billy was guiding troops, which was not the case. The big red-head seemed frightened over the prospect of cavalrymen being in the vicinity.

"I'm Alben Hadley, captain of this wagon train!" the big man declared. "You'll answer any questions I want to ask you, Bates. That clear?"

Billy arched an eyebrow, his gaze meeting the furious eyes of Alben Hadley levelly. He tried hard to squelch the fire of keening interest, remembering the mission that had brought him here to these lonely plains. That mission was so secret and of such importance, that any involvement in side issues might bring a sharp reprimand from both Buffalo Billy Cody and General Crook.

"Let's not argue, Hadley!" Billy said. "I'm not here to quarrel with you."

"Mind your own blasted business, then!" Hadley snapped. "We caught this Injun snoopin' around. He's been at it for near a week. I aim to hang him whether you like it or not."

"You're evidently new to the frontier, Hadley," Billy droned.

"What do you mean by that remark?" the big man asked.

"A man who knows anything about this frontier would never make the mistake of hangin' an Indian!" Billy told him sharply. "To the savages, hanging is the insult supreme. They believe that the spirit of a hanged man cannot enter the Happy Hunting grounds until the hanged one has been avenged. Kick the box out from under this buck, and you've signed the

death warrants of every man, woman and child in your party."

Billy saw uneasy glances pass between the wagoneers. They shifted around, muttering, many of them glancing fearfully at the skyline above the shallow sink.

"I'm not tryin' to scare anyone!" Billy went on. "I'm simply warnin' you. You can shoot this Indian, knife him, knock his brains out with a club or trample him to death, and nothin' may come of it. But hang him, and some dawn a screaming horde of painted warriors will swarm into your camp to wipe out every last one of you."

"Thanks for the warnin', young feller!" a grizzled man near Billy spoke up.

BILLY opened his lips to reply, but bit the words back when a slender, black-haired girl came rushing around the front of the wagon. The girl looked up at Billy out of eyes that were violet shadows under thick lashes, and her full, red mouth smiled a friendly greeting. Then she was before Alben Hadley, who had made a growling sound deep in his thick throat and raised a freckled hand as if he meant to slap the girl.

"Susan, you get back to your Ma's wagon, and do it right now!" Hadley yelled at the girl.

When she made no effort to obey, Hadley lurched towards her, freckled paw again cocked. Billy Bates stepped out of the saddle and blocked Hadley, tawny eyes narrow and coldly bright. Hadley cursed and drove a big hand at Billy's face, two stiffened fingers aimed at the scout's eyes. Billy jerked his head aside, felt Hadley's grime-clogged nails cut his left cheek, and whipped his left fist into the big man's midriff.

Hadley staggered back, then got his balance and drove a bullhide boot at Billy's abdomen. The scout weaved away, seized Hadley's heel, and heaved mightily. The big red-head slammed backwards, a profane howl dying to a flabby tone in his throat when his shaggy head slammed the box upon which the Indian stood.

"Thunderation!" Billy yelled.

Everyone else, even Susan, was yelling, too. Hadley's massive weight had tilted the box out from under the Indian! Billy leaped into the air, caught the jiggling rope in his left hand, and whipped his scalping knife from a scabbard at his belt with his right hand. The knife blade flashed in the morning sun, steel bit into taut hemp, and suddenly the Indian was on the ground, sprawling across Alben Hadley. Billy dropped, but saw that Susan was already crouching beside the Indian, working the loosened noose over the brave's head.

"I'll look after him now, Miss Susan," Billy told the girl.

The girl nodded, watching the Indian's lean, hawkish features in fascination. The buck was young, powerfully muscled, and had absorbed the shock of dangling by the neck without visible ill effects. He coughed a time or two, then looked up at Billy out of black eyes that held a strangely amused gleam.

"You are Hunts Alone, the son of Long Hair," the Indian said in good English.

"Hunts Alone? Long Hair?" Susan echoed the two names, turning her violet eyes to Billy.

Billy sliced the thongs at the Indian's wrists and ankles, then stood up, sheathing his keen knife. The girl got to her feet, still watching him, waiting for him to speak.

"The Indians call me 'Hunts Alone' because I generally get missions that call for one-man operation," Billy told Susan. "All tribes call Bill Cody 'Long Hair' because of his long yellow curls."

"But this Indian said you are Mr. Cody's son!" Susan exclaimed. "I do not believe that. I've seen Mr. Cody on the stage, back East, a number of times. He certainly is not old enough to be your father."

"Of course he isn't!" Billy said with a smile. "But Cody rescued me from Indians, several years ago, put me through school, then taught me scoutin'. The Indians call me Bill's 'son' because of that."

Susan smiled, and looked even lovelier, Billy thought. He wanted to keep talking with her, but the wagoneers were milling

and muttering uneasily, and Alben Hadley was beginning to grunt and move sluggishly.

"My pony was down the line of wagons a piece, Billy!" the Indian said suddenly. "Let's get out of here, quickly."

JERKING his head around, Billy stared at him. The young buck had spoken without the least trace of accent, and with such earnestness the stalwart scout was not surprised to see urgent appeal in the Indian's keen eyes.

"If we try talking here, Billy, Hadley will regain his wits and there will be serious trouble," the young Indian said rapidly. "I've molested none of these people, nor any of their possessions. Trust me until we get to a place where we can talk. I know how to reach a friend of yours who will vouch for me. The man calls himself 'Drifter,' Billy."

Billy Bates gave such a start he thought he must have jumped a foot off the ground. He glanced at the still bunched and muttering wagoneers, scowling to cover the excitement that was ripping through him.

"You men have any objections if this Indian leaves with me?" he asked of the crowd at large.

"He's spied on us five days runnin', Bates," a chunky fellow spoke up. "But he's made no trouble of any kind."

"Please go, Billy Bates!" Susan put in. "Alben Hadley will be wild over what you did to him."

"I'm not uneasy about Hadley's toughness," Billy shrugged. "I'd like to ask the big knuckle-head why he's pokin' around off here instead of followin' the Santa Fe Trail."

"We are following this lonely way because Alben Hadley cannot get along with other parties along the Trail, Billy!" Susan said. "And don't think you'd have just Alben to worry about. His three cronies, Gig Dudley, Bay Lester and Sam Blackwell, are even worse at picking fights than Alben is."

Billy glanced at the wagoneers, eyes alert. Susan made an exasperated sound, jerking hard at his buckskin sleeve.

"Alben's three cronies aren't here or they'd have jumped you!" Susan told him. "They left before dawn, to kill buffalo for meat. Please take this Indian and leave, Billy, before they return. Please!"

"All right, Miss Susan," Billy said, grinning at her. "But Hadley had better cut out his nonsense and get back to the Trail. With the whole frontier threatened by Indian uprisings after the Sioux victory over General Custer, you people are in a lot of danger, wandering around this lonely part of the plain."

"Hadley is about to get his senses back, son!" an old man called to Billy.

Billy nodded, then looked around, intending to say something to Susan. But she was hurrying past the wagon, dark curls bobbing as she lifted her skirts and ran. The scout glanced at the Indian beside him, nodded, and stepped to his waiting mount. The Indian dashed away, heading for the long string of wagons.

Alben Hadley cursed groggily, pushed at the ground with his hands, and leaned against thick arms. Billy stared down at him for a moment, then turned his horse, waved casually to the uneasy wagoneers, and loped away. He saw the Indian he had rescued come out from behind one of the Conestogas, mounted on a splendid sorrel. Billy stood up in the stirrups, shock hammering through hm.

"Piute!" he cried. "That Injun is on Joe Spain's famous racer, Piute."

The sorrel came in alongside Billy's big bay, fighting the thong looped to its lower jaw, wanting to run. The Indian sat astride of a blanket that was thonged to the sorrel's back, swaying and perfectly balanced, a superb horseman. Billy saw the young Buck's lips smile faintly, and caught amused humor in the flashing black eyes.

"I believe you recognize Piute, eh?" the Indian asked.

"I believe I'll break your neck if you don't start clearin' up a few things!" the scout said, glaring at him. "Where did you get that sorrel, mister?"

"Indians call me 'Many Tongues,' Billy, because I speak several languages besides Indian dialects," the young brave an-

swered with a smile. "But I was christened James Benton by the missionary couple who took me in as a child, and showed me the same kindness and care they showed their own son. I'm Jimmy, to my friends."

"All right, Jimmy!" Billy said sternly. "Let's get back to 'Drifter,' and how you happen to be ridin' this Piute sorrel. That sorrel belongs to—"

ABRUPTLY Billy broke off. He was puzzled and uneasy, scarcely knowing what to think. His mission here on the plains was not only highly secret, but one of the most important he had ever been given. Somewhere on towards the Arkansas River he was due to rendezvous with a wagon train captained by a man named Benjamin Kent. According to the information Billy had been given by Bill Cody, lanky, gray-haired Joe Spain should be acting as guide for the Kent party.

Billy's orders were to drop in on the Kent party while they were encamped some evening, maneuver around until he was certain he was alone with Joe Spain, then mention that "Drifter" had sent him. When Billy clamored for an answer to such strange requests from his superior, Buffalo Bill Cody had told him an astonishing thing.

"Joe Spain and other seasoned frontiersmen have taken it upon themselves to form a sort of secret service unit, Billy," Cody had explained. "Modern rifles and ammunition, as you know only too well, are constantly coming into the hands of hostiles. Well, Joe Spain and men who work under him are trying to find not only sizable shipments of rifles and ammunition which start west, but they're trying to spot the big dealers who supply rifles and ammunition to the gun runners. Any information Spain and his men gather will be sent to me, by word of mouth."

Billy was recalling that conversation now. He wished that he had pressed Cody for further details. He did remember Buffalo Bill saying that Joe Spain and those other civilian scouts who had gone after evidence against gun runners would act as guides for wagon trains to divert suspicion from their real efforts.

"When one of them has information he feels I should have, he will get word to me, telling me how he can be reached," Cody had told Billy. "Word came a few days ago that Joe Spain is coming out of Saint Louis as guide for a wagon train captained by a man named Benjamin Kent. Spain has something he wants me to know, Billy. You've known Joe a long time, of course. But until you say that 'Drifter' sent you, he will divulge no secret, for 'Drifter' is the code word that will tell Joe Spain I sent you to receive whatever information he has."

But something was wrong. Here was a smooth-talking young Indian who knew that code word, 'Drifter,' and had used it in a manner that proved he knew at least something of its value. And the Indian was on Joe Spain's own famous racer, Piute! Billy gave his head a slow shake. He looked at the Indian, and found grave black eyes watching him soberly.

"When I mentioned 'Drifter,' a while ago, you got a surprise, Billy," Jimmy Benton said. "You got another surprise when you saw and recognized this sorrel. You're the scout Buffalo Bill Cody sent down here to meet Joe Spain."

"What makes you think Bill Cody sent anyone down here to meet Joe Spain?" Billy asked sharply.

"Mr. Spain told me," Jimmy replied.

"You know Joe Spain pretty well, eh?" Billy countered.

"I've known him ever since I can remember," the Indian answered promptly. "Mr. Spain and the people who reared me were very close friends."

"Well, if I bump into a certain wagon train I can ask Joe Spain about that, at least," Billy declared.

"I wish that were so, Billy," Jimmy Benton said gently. "But that can never be. Mr. Spain is dead."

"What's that?" Billy cried.

"Joe Spain was shot to death, exactly seven days ago today," the Indian declared.

"How do you know this?" Billy flung

the question sharply.

"I saw him soon after it happened," Jimmy told him. "I had been east of the Arkansas, acting as interpreter for an army major who was trying to spread good will among the Osages and other tribes. It was dull work, and I quit when I heard that a wagon train, with Mr. Spain acting as guide, had passed through Kansas. I set out after the party, wanting very much to see Spain again. I met him on the trail around midnight. This racer of his was ready to drop, and Mr. Spain had roped himself to the saddle. He died before dawn, Billy."

THE young scout stared at the Indian, his face somber.

"Did he talk any, Jimmy?" Billy asked gravely.

"A little, after he finally understood who I was," the Indian nodded. "He gave me this racer and all his personal possessions, Billy, and asked me to shadow the party he had been guiding, watch until some buckskin scout like yourself would intercept the caravan. I was to approach the scout and say that 'Drifter' sent me. If the scout reacted by showing uneasiness and surprise, as you did, I was to get him where others could not hear and tell him what happened to Mr. Spain."

"Then why in thunder did you poke off over here and get into a mess with that Hadley rascal?" Billy asked sharply.

"But that's the caravan Mr. Spain was with, Billy," Jimmy declared. "He told me where and how to find it. He also warned me to watch out for Alben Hadley and Hadley's three cronies, Gig Dudley, Bay Lester and Sam Blackwell."

"Something is all mixed up!" Billy groaned. "Joe Spain was to be guiding a caravan captained by a man named Benjamin Kent."

"Benjamin Kent!" Jimmy cut in excitedly. "Why, Mr. Spain mentioned that name."

"What did he say about Benjamin Kent?" Billy asked eagerly.

"He said that Benjamin Kent was murdered by skulkers who fired on the camp one night as the party reached the Smoky River, in Kansas!" Jimmy replied. "I was so worried over Mr. Spain's condition that I did not pay close attention to his talking, I'm afraid. But I do remember that he said something about Alben Hadley and those other three, Gig Dudley, Bay Lester and Sam Blackwell, joining the party with their wagons the following day, and that Hadley promptly set himself up as captain of the caravan. Maybe Susan could tell us about that, Billy."

"Susan?" Billy exclaimed. "That girl who was with that bunch, back yonder?"

"Of course!" Jimmy nodded. "Her name is Kent, Billy. I've heard her called that many times when I crept in close to their camp after dark, to watch and listen and hope a man in buckskins would come asking for Mr. Spain."

"Blazes!" Billy growled. "Of course we'll have to have a talk with Susan Kent. But after my set-to with Alben Hadley, I'll have trouble if he sees me tryin' to talk with the girl."

"Hadley will never see us," Jimmy declared. "After dark tonight, we can get into their camp easily. I know the Kent wagon when I see it. If we had enough help, it would be fun to follow Mr. Spain's suggestions concerning the wagons that belong to Alben Hadley and his three friends."

"What did Joe Spain say about those wagons?" Billy asked quickly.

"Mr. Spain said, 'Jimmy, if a scout comes to the caravan and you're sure he's the one Buffalo Bill Cody sent to find me, tell that scout I said the wagons belonging to Alben Hadley, Gig Dudley, Bay Lester and Sam Blackwell need dumping,' " the Indian reported.

"Thanks for deliverin' that message, Jimmy!" Billy said gravely. "I think I savvy what Joe Spain was drivin' at. How did Hadley happen to get hold of you this mornin'?"

"Me heap dumb Injun!" Jimmy clucked. "I went to sleep in the grass, last night, while I was watching the caravan. A couple of those wagoneers prodded me awake at dawn with rifle muzzles."

"Soon as Hadley's three pals return from their hunt, he'll set 'em after us," Billy said, frowning. "We'll have to hole up somewhere until dark, Jimmy."

"I have a camp, yonder in the cedar brakes," Jimmy pointed with his chin. "We'll be safe there, for the camp is well hidden."

JIMMY'S camp really was well hidden. Billy was following Jimmy along a narrow, cedar-choked gulch, unaware that they were anywhere near a campsite until the Indian stopped. Jimmy glanced at Billy, grinning widely when he saw the scout's puzzled expression.

"I'm still an Injun, Billy, regardless of the wonderful schooling my white foster parents gave me," Jimmy declared. "Dismount and come along. The camp is in here."

Billy swung out of the saddle and led his bay gelding, following the fine sorrel Jimmy was leading into what appeared to be a dense thicket. But presently they came into a tiny natural meadow, where a spring bubbled up from the base of a tall rock. Jimmy grinned at Billy's astonishment, then quickly freed the big sorrel of its simple gear. Billy stripped his own bay, shaking his head in wonderment as he looked around. The little meadow held no signs of having been used as a camp site.

"Behind the big rock, in the fringe of brush, is where I've built my fires," Jimmy explained. "My things are hidden in a thicket, back there."

"We sure ought to be safe here for the day," Billy nodded approvingly.

"Billy, look out!" a clear voice wailed.

Billy Bates thought he went straight up at least a full yard. A gun roared from somewhere beyond the rock at the spring, and Billy saw Jimmy arch upward, spin half over, and come down hard, blood spurting from his right side. Then guns were hammering wildly around Billy, and something ripped hard across his left thigh, spilling him to the ground!

Susan Kent plunged from a fringe of brush ten paces away, leaving the right sleeve of her dress in one of Alben Hadley's huge fists as the big red-head lurched from the bushes, grabbing at her. Susan put on a burst of speed, streaking towards Billy. Alben Hadley saw Billy, and his broad face grew savage as he slanted a pistol down, aiming.

"Down, Susan!" Billy yelled, and saw her check, fold over, and drop to the turf.

Alben Hadley's pistol flamed, the bullet from it fanning Billy's right cheek. Billy's Dragoon thundered its first shot then, and Hadley crashed backwards into the brush, bellowing wild oaths. A strange sort of gurgling scream sounded off to Billy's left somewhere, but he had no time to investigate that.

A stocky, blunt-jawed man had stepped out from behind the big rock at the spring, armed with a pair of cap-and-ball pistols. He leveled those pistols at Billy when he saw him stretched out on the grass. The pistols flamed, and Billy groaned through clenched teeth when a bullet burned across the small of his back. His Dragoon jumped and roared, and the stocky man wilted, shot in the face.

"Look left, Billy!" Susan Kent cried. "Gig Dudley!"

Billy glanced, flipping over in a quick roll. A slim, narrow-faced man squatting at the edge of the thickets swore angrily and threw a load into the chamber of a repeating Spencer rifle. The Spencer was coming to the man's shoulder when Billy drove a bullet into him. The slim man leaped like a long frog, landing flat on his face.

"Keep down, Susan!" Billy warned, and got to his feet.

A pistol roared at him from the brush beyond the crouching girl, the bullet knocking the beaver hat from his head. He ducked instinctively, firing into the bushes where powder smoke hung heaviest. The gun roared at him again, a yard to the left of the spot Billy had fired into. He felt the slug rip along his ribs, the force of it throwing him backwards. He tripped and fell sprawling, hearing a hoarse bawl of triumph and the crackling of brush. When Billy spun over to face the thicket again, Alben Hadley was charging from the

cedars, a pistol in each big fist, blood wetting one side of his face where Billy's first shot had cut a shallow gash.

"Say your prayers, buckskin man!" Hadley whooped.

BUT that moment of gloating was his undoing. Billy Bates had gathered his wits, snaked his Dragoon's muzzle out along the grasstops, and dropped the big hammer. Alben Hadley's pistols roared, but the big man was already cringing backwards, shock and pain wrenching a wild yell from his throat. His left leg bent strangely at the thigh, and he went over in a hard fall, pistols flying from his hands.

Billy Bates lurched to his feet, tawny eyes alert, Dragoon chopping down when brush wiggled over near the spring. An angular, horse-faced man had come stumbling out of those bushes, white to the lips, bleating at the top of his lungs. Jimmy Benton, the Indian, was behind the man, twisting his right arm up in a hammerlock that threatened to pull tendons and snap bones at any second. Jimmy was blood all over, but his black eyes twinkled.

"Meet Sam Blackwell, Billy!" Jimmy sang out.

"Good boy, Jimmy!" Billy called. "Fetch that slab-sided specimen over here in the open and keep him busy while I see about these others."

"Billy, you're hurt!" Susan Kent cried, rushing to him.

"I'm all right," he told her calmly. "Stay put, while I get these three cripples dragged out into the open. And before I forget it, thanks for yelling a warning. I'd have been a dead duck if you hadn't done that, little lady."

Susan did not "stay put" as Billy had suggested. She went right along with him, taking hold and helping him drag Alben Hadley well out into the clearing. She was still beside Billy when he went to get the stocky, blunt-jawed fellow he had shot down at the big rock.

"This one is Bay Lester, Billy," Susan panted. "Is he dead?"

Bay Lester was far from dead, although he was out cold. Billy's bullet had torn his right cheek badly, and the man's face was a grisly mask of blood. Susan shivered a little, but gamely took hold of one of Lester's thick wrists and helped skid him out into the clearing. Billy turned to the third man then—the tall, skinny one who had tried to kill him with a rifle.

"He's Gig Dudley," Susan exclaimed. "And he really does *look* dead, Billy."

Billy caught her shoulders, turned her quickly away, and walked back to where the two wounded men lay sprawled. Jimmy Benton was there, still holding his punishing hammerlock on Sam Blackwell.

"Gig Dudley?" Jimmy asked.

"We can't help," Susan said gently.

"Now, Susan, let's hear what you have to say," Billy put in quickly. "Did this bunch kidnap you and bring you out here?"

"No," she shook her head emphatically. "I saddled a horse and started out after you, Billy, because mother thought you might help us. We're terrified of this Alben Hadley and his three bullying friends. But Alben came riding out after me, and slapped me off my horse when I wouldn't tell him where I was going. I threatened to tell the other wagoneers that he had struck me, and he went crazy with rage. He slammed me back on my horse and brought me here."

"Here, to this place, Miss Kent?" Jimmy asked sharply.

"Yes," Susan nodded. "Gig Dudley, Bay Lester and Sam Blackwell were already here."

"So those three weren't out huntin' meat, after all!" Billy said. "Looks like they spotted your camp somehow, Jimmy, and decided to stake out here and nab you."

"How about that, Blackwell?" Jimmy asked, and gave the man's tortured arm a twist.

"We found your camp yesterday—saw smoke!" Blackwell babbled. "We slipped down here to see who was camped, only there was nobody around. But we found that black saddle and them buckskin clothes, hid yonder in the bushes with camp stuff that belonged to Joe Spain."

"I reckon that gave you devils a scare!" Billy Bates observed grimly.

SCOWLING up at Buffalo Billy, the outlaw shook his head.

"I didn't get no scare," Blackwell panted. "It was me and Gig and Bay that saw the smoke and finally located this camp. When we saw Joe Spain's stuff here, we sifted back to the wagons and told Alben. Bay and Gig was bad scared, thinkin' Joe Spain was still alive. Alben got scared, too."

"But you didn't get scared when you thought the bushwhack bullets you and these others fired into Joe Spain's back had failed to kill him?" Billy asked mockingly.

"I didn't get scairt, because I knew Joe Spain couldn't have took all the lead he did and still be alive!" Blackwell croaked. "I tried to make Alben and Gig and Bay see it that way. But they wouldn't listen. Alben sent us three out here before daylight this mornin', figgerin' we could nab Joe Spain."

"Joe Spain got curious as to what you and Alben Hadley and Gig Dudley and Bay Lester were haulin' in the wagons you own," Billy went on. "You renegades couldn't afford to have him snoopin', so you murdered him. For the bushwhack bullets you fired into his back did finish him."

"I knew that!" Blackwell moaned. "Even if that sorrel racer of Joe Spain's did plumb outrun our four horses that night, I *knew* Spain was too hard hit to ever live."

"Billy, you'll hold Alben Hadley, Bay Lester and this Sam Blackwell until they can be turned over to the authorities, won't you?" Susan Kent asked.

"Sam Blackwell, there, just admitted that he helped Alben Hadley, Gig Dudley and Bay Lester murder Joe Spain!" Billy told her firmly. "Don't worry about Hadley and these other two not bein' held."

"They murdered Benjamin Kent, my father, Billy!" Susan burst out.

"What's that?" the scout cried.

"Slap that lyin' wench down, Bates!" Alben Hadley croaked. "Me and Gig and Bay and Sam had nothin' to do with her daddy gettin' shot. Drunk Injuns rode past their camp, back on the Smoky River, in Kansas, and shot at the camp fires. A bullet hit old Kent and killed him."

"That isn't so!" Susan retorted. "Joe Spain, our guide, said the men who fired into our camp that night were riding shod horses. Mr. Spain said that indicated white men had done that shooting. When you and your three vicious cronies showed up the following morning with your wagons and claimed my father had hired you the day before, to take charge of the drive through the dangerous Indian country ahead, Mother and I both knew that you were lying!"

"How did you and your mother know that Hadley was lyin', Susan, when he claimed your father had hired him to see the caravan through Indian country?" Billy asked.

"We camped on the Smoky shortly after noon of the day my father was killed," Susan said quickly. "Daddy rode alone into a little Kansas settlement that afternoon, wanting to ask about the trail ahead and how bad the Indian trouble was. When he returned to the caravan he was angry and upset. Mother and I asked what was wrong, and he told us that a man named Alben Hadley had approached him at the settlement, asking permission to join our caravan with four wagons. Daddy said he did not like Hadley's looks and refused, then had to refuse a cash bribe Hadley offered him. When my father would not accept a bribe, Alben Hadley would have beaten him up if soldiers at the settlement had not interfered."

"You and your mother reported fully to Joe Spain?" Billy asked the girl.

THE girl nodded. "Just as soon as we could locate him after Daddy's murder," Susan said. "Mr. Spain told us to say nothing to the other wagoneers who were my father's friends. Mr. Spain meant to go to the settlement the following morning and have Alben Hadley found and questioned by the authorities. But just

before dawn Alben and his three friends came to our camp with their wagons, pretending great surprise on being told that my father was dead."

"Joe Spain let Hadley take charge, eh?" Billy prompted.

"Yes," Susan answered. "He seemed excited, and told mother that he had good reasons for wanting to pretend to believe that Hadley was telling the truth about having been hired by my father to see the caravan through the Indian country."

"Bates, you know better than to put stock in that little fool's wild yarns!" Alben Hadley panted. "Where's her proof?"

"Proof will be in your wagon, and in the three wagons owned by Gig Dudley, Bay Lester and Sam Blackwell!" Billy said.

Sam Blackwell yelled and tried to bolt, only to have Jimmy Benton tighten the hammerlock. Blackwell wilted, moaning in pain. Alben Hadley swore a jarring oath and lunged upward, trying to get his feet under him. But his bullet-shattered thigh buckled and he fell so hard the breath went out of him in a panting moan.

"What on earth, Billy!" Susan Kent gasped. "Do Alben and his friends have something in their wagons they wish to keep hidden?"

"I'm convinced that those wagons will turn out to be full of rifles and ammunition Hadley and his bunch meant to sell to hostile Indians!" Billy told her gravely. "Hadley evidently knew that he and his three gun-runnin' pals were bein' watched, and figured that gettin' in with a respectable outfit would let them slip across the frontier unsuspected. He engineered the murder of your father and took charge of your caravan, Susan. Then Hadley and his pals no doubt discovered that Joe Spain was on to them, and they promptly murdered poor old Joe. But Joe Spain left a message that puts a noose around their necks, even if he did lose his own life!" • • •

SWEETHEARTS *of the* OUTLAW TRAILS

IT IS POPULAR to think of the Western badman as a lone owlhooter who lived and died without the ameliorating companionship of the fair sex. But that is false. The worst of them had their soft moments. Many of them would not have died or been captured at all if it hadn't been for that weakness.

True, most of the girls were mere bawdyhouse strumpets. But there were a few good, clean women who chose their badmen and stuck by them, and they deserve every credit for their strange loyalties. Who could possibly forget the legendary devotion of that frail, shy creature who loved Henry Plummer, not knowing his true profession until his death? And one cannot help but admire the fierce, possessive love of Mary Virginia Slade for her lawless spouse, Joseph A. Slade.

How can one ever know the anxieties, the gnawing fears, the sudden terrors that must have stalked the heels of the wives of Jesse and Frank James? Strange indeed is the devotion of such women as Etta Place, reputed to be the illegitimate daughter of an English lord, who gasped out her life at the side of her husband in an ambush in faraway South America.

Although the record has it that Butch Cassidy let women strictly alone, I like to think of Laura Bullion—a camp follower of the Wild Bunch—as his sweetheart.

Even the despised traitors had their loves. It was a dance hall girl, the last beloved of that "dirty little coward who shot Mr. Howard," whose gory fingers picked the collar button out of Bob Ford's severed jugular vein. It had been driven there by the murderous slugs of Ed Kelly. And of all the gunmen, it had to be Buckskin Frank Leslie who dared violate the rigid code of the Western badmen by committing that unpardonable sin—shooting his woman. In a fit of jealousy, he murdered his sweetheart and the man he suspected of stealing her love. He was sentenced to the pen.

—Manly E. David

Matt stood out in the open, daring the bullets

RIVER MAN

Death spoiled Matt's plans in more ways than one—but the river had added something no one could take away!

MATT BALLINGER was stacking the last of the wood when he heard the familiar tooting signal. He turned and saw the *Prairie Miss* rounding the bend, her funnels exhaling heavy black smoke, and his heart danced. Captain Tim Mason should be bringing great news for him this trip.

He watched, fascinated, as the sidewheeler navigated the tricky river channel. The Missouri was treacherous in this high Dakota wilderness but not with the same slashing treachery as farther down. After the Musselshell, the Milk and the Yellowstone had contributed their torrents to the Big Muddy it became a swirling, gluttonous demon, sometimes devouring an entire sidehill overnight.

Up here, however, it was little more than a meandering creek. Rainwater, some of the pilots called it. Especially those who refused to navigate farther than

By GEOFFREY MAPES

Fort Buford. Yet Captain Tim Mason and his pilot, two of the select few, had been making the run regularly for the past five years. Captain Tim always managed to stretch out his fuel until he reached Matt Ballinger's wood yard where he took on his final supply for the run to Fort Benton.

Matt watched with pride as the boat nudged into the bank. He grabbed the bowline and made it fast to a stump. Then he stepped back and saw Ab Monahan, the pilot, waving to him from the Texas deck. There was no sign of Captain Tim.

Monahan disappeared abruptly. A few moments later he shouldered his way down the gangplank past the deck hands who were loading the wood.

Monahan was tall, a gangling man with bleak eyes. He was conscious of his height and walked stoop-shouldered. The rivermen said he had the finest pair of wheel hands on the river. Matt saw that his eyes looked more bleak than usual as he came up and they shook hands.

"Where's Captain Tim?"

Monahan shuffled his feet and looked down. Then he jerked a thumb over his shoulder.

"In his bunk."

"Is he sick?" Matt felt a deep, quick sympathy for the jolly blue-eyed Irishman who had long been his friend.

"He's dead."

THROUGH the shocked mazes of his mind Matt tried to form a question. As if in answer, Monahan turned. He pointed to the fresh bullet splotches on the rusted boiler plate which guarded the Texas deck and pilot house.

"Sioux," he said briefly. "Just this side of Buford."

They stood in silence for an endless moment.

"Did—did he say anything about me? Or have a letter for me?"

Ab Monahan shook his head. Then he half raised his hand in a farewell gesture and went aboard.

Matt stood there feeling empty as he watched the *Prairie Miss* churn away from the bank and edge upstream. It was a two-way emptiness. He had staked his entire future on the message Tim Mason would be bringing from St. Louis this trip. Now there was no message; and there would be no more Captain Tim. No one to bring him those guarded dispatches of love and encouragement that eased his heart in this high wilderness. No one to bring him gradually from the pit of despair to the near peak of happiness.

Tears blurred the path as he made his way back to the cabin. He sat heavily on his bunk and let the panorama of his memories spread out in a misty picture before him.

He had met Captain Tim Mason in St. Louis a little more than five years ago. It was while Matt was courting Catherine Bixby. The laughing Irish wit had captured their hearts, and whenever the *Prairie Miss* was docked, they made a happy threesome. Catherine gaily offered to get

another girl for Tim, but he always declined.

"A river man has his boat, you know," he would tell her. "He could never do justice to another woman."

Then they would all laugh.

After two years of this, when Matt figured he was well enough fixed, he proposed to Catherine. She turned him down firmly but as gently as possible. He could see that gentleness now, but at the time he was hurt, confused, humiliated. He determined to try the gold fields and took passage on the *Prairie Miss*.

During the arduous trip upstream Tim had talked to him, tried to reason with him. He pointed out the low caliber of men who were heading for the gold fields, several of them on this load. Then he suggested the wood lot as an alternative. It would be steady, clean, solitary. The ideal place for a man to heal his soul.

Reluctantly Matt has taken Tim's advice and by the time the *Prairie Miss* came upstream again he had to admit that Tim was right. He felt like a different man as he waved from the bank. And he had cut nearly twenty cords of wood.

He remembered Tim leaning over the rail.

"I've seen her," Tim had reported quietly.

Matt had checked a rush of words.

"Is—is she well?"

Captain Tim nodded. "Aye, and I gave her word of you. But she said little, except she wished you well."

HE WAS silent a moment; and then he pointed to Matt.

"But I do have a word. You've got to keep yourself up, laddy buck. Keep clean and keep shaved. If you let yourself go woolly, you'll get that way in spirit, too. Then it's no woman will have ye."

Matt had taken the hint. He began shaving every second day. He laundered every two weeks and tried to cut his hair as best he could. Captain Tim's approval reflected in his eyes the next time he stopped.

"I've seen her again," he announced. "I think she has found she's very much interested in you, after all." He laughed. "But just like a woman, she won't put anything in writing. Afraid she might commit herself."

That was the way it had started. Catherine never wrote, but at regular intervals Tim had brought messages and bits of gossip. He told how she looked, what she had been doing and what she wore. Matt, in turn, sent her messages and occasionally wrote a letter, but he refrained from pressing his love. He let her know of his undying interest but told her he was seeing the world through new eyes. And the nearness he felt for her was reflected in everything around him. It was bringing out a manhood he had not even suspected.

He recalled Captain Tim Mason as he had seen him on the last trip. Instead of leaning over the rail he had come ashore and gripped hands. He had a faintly troubled look in his eyes, but only for a moment.

"Lad," he had said with a laugh, "I would estimate that your cure is about complete." Then the laughter went out of his face. "I think," he said seriously, "that you're about ready for a move. One way or another."

"Yes," Matt said breathlessly. "Yes, when you see her this time tell her I love her very much. If she'll have me now, I'll come down by next boat. We'll be married, and I'll bring her out to a real country."

Tim Mason was holding up his hands.

"Whoa, there! Not so fast. I'm afraid you've got a city girl on your hands. I'm thinking she would never consent to live in this paradise of yours."

"Well then, tell her we'll live in St. Louis or wherever she wants. We'll go to Chicago or even back east if she says the word."

Tim had promised to bring her answer and pick him up on the next run. He was almost sure the answer would be yes.

Only now there was no more Captain Tim and no answer.

Matt sat with his head in his hands for a while, mourning the loss of the blue eyes

and the ready laugh. Then he looked up. He looked at the inside of this cabin he had built with his own hands. It was well-knit, handy and neat; but it was rough, too rough for a woman, and he realized that Tim was right again. You could hardly expect a girl of Catherine's breeding to live in a place like this, even though he had grown to love it himself.

The decision had been haunting the back of his mind and now it came forward. He had no other choice. He began to throw his things together. At first, he started to pack everything. Then he changed his mind. A lot of these things would not fit in the city. He finally packed just enough clothing to see him through. He would have to hurry. The *Prairie Miss* sailed from Fort Benton at sharp midnight.

He was on the bank when the running lights of the boat loomed out of the upriver darkness. He lighted his lantern and began to swing it in a circle. As the boat came nearer he heard the soft swish that meant the paddles were being reversed.

"Who's there?" came the hail from the Texas deck. He caught the glint of a rifle barrel. "Talk up quick or I'll shoot."

"It's Matt Ballinger," he cried. "I want passage downriver."

HE CLIMBED aboard and went up to shake hands with Ab Monahan who had assumed the double role of master and pilot for the remainder of the run. There was no need of a question.

"We buried him up yonder," Ab said.

In the darkness he saw Ab's head jerk in the direction of Fort Benton.

"He always had a fondness for the place," Matt murmured.

Ab nodded and turned back to his piloting.

Matt looked back through the darkness as they pulled away. He felt a little gnawing somewhere inside him. The place was wild and rough, yes. But it was also a place where he had found mental and physical and spiritual balm. If he were a religious man, he would say that he had found God in that timbered wilderness. At any rate, he had found a new meaning to life under that great sweep of sky and in the chatter of little animals and in the howls of greater ones. He had come to sense many things with a faculty he had not known he possessed when he was surrounded by the dirt and bustle of the city.

He turned his back resolutely and went along the Texas deck. Monahan heard him coming but held his eyes to the river. They would have to tie up at night when they got farther down, but there was little Indian danger here and to run aground would not be serious. They could make good time.

"Stow your gear in the captain's cabin," Monahan said over his shoulder. "He would like it. He was that set on you."

It was a simple tribute but it caused Matt's stomach to feel tight. He went below.

They stopped for wood at Fort Peck. The boilers had lazy appetites on this downriver run. This left more room for passengers and cargo.

At Fort Buford they fueled again and also took aboard General Miles and his retinue. The general had just wound up his Yellowstone campaign and had come down that river on the packet *Luella.*

Matt thrilled at meeting the famous man and his subordinates, although it meant relinquishing Tim Mason's cabin to the general. At first, listening to their bloodthirsty tales, he felt some stir of adventure. But on the second day he sickened of the ceaseless killing and went topside.

The river was getting a new voice now and a new pulse. He could feel the vibration in his legs. They were below the Yellowstone, and the current was getting wide, swift and muddy. Angry boils appeared in the widened channel. Huge uprooted trees dived and sank, porpoise fashion, or were twirled about like twigs. Matt felt a kinship and love for the surging river. It was wild, yes, but it was going places and it answered to no one.

He came onto the top deck just in time to hear Ab Monahan ringing furiously for full speed astern. He looked ahead and saw that they were coming into a sweeping bend. The channel swung in, then hooked

sharply under a high bluff. On the nigh side stood a bluff equally high.

Then he saw something else. Logs and whole trees were jammed in the bend. Water leaped, sloshed and foamed as it fought to get over and around.

Ab Monahan stuck his head out of the pilot house as the reverse action of the wheel began to slow the boat.

"That don't look like no natural jam to me," he shouted. "Not at that spot." His eyes swept the nigh bluff and he frowned. "Sioux, maybe."

He reached back into the pilot house and handed Matt a Winchester. The boat was slowing, but the current would carry them to the jam within minutes.

Matt took the gun and found shelter behind a boiler plate slab. He scanned the bluff but there was no sign of Indians, and he wondered if Monahan wasn't overly suspicious. He squatted and made himself a smoke.

Moments later he was almost nudged off balance and he heard a low, whining, grinding sound. The boat had reached the jam and nosed into it.

Then all hell broke open. Piercing yells echoed between the bluffs as bullets whanged against the boiler plates.

"Give it to the bastards!" He heard a hoarse yell on the lower deck.

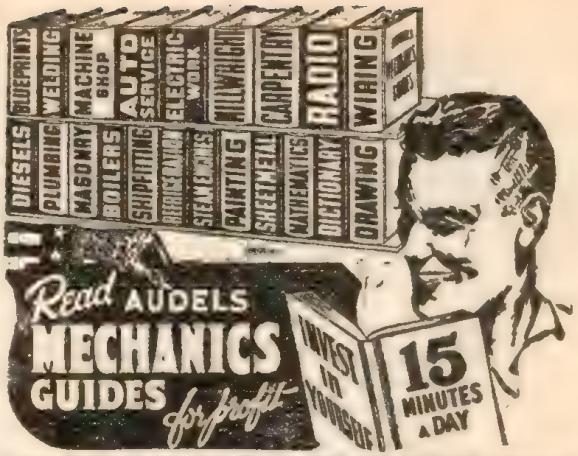
SO THIS was the way Tim Mason had got it.

Matt had thought he would be afraid but found that his blood was racing with excitement. He even managed a grin.

There were worse ways of going. A man might live to get old and rheumy or bloated and die in some stuffy house or tenement. Or he might spend the rest of his days behind bars or get hanged. He might never thrill or taste the tang of this sort of fight for his life.

The sharp bark of the Winchesters answered the Indians on the bluff. Then the roar of army pistols and rifles added to the din. Matt peeked around the plate and saw a dark thatch of hair near the defile that ran down the bluff to the river.

[*Turn page*]



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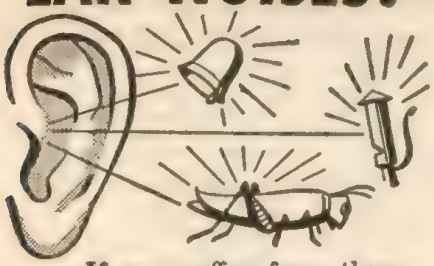

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So that was it. They had planned to swoop down the gully and swarm over the boat when it was halted.

Matt stepped out from behind his shelter. He fired a snap shot at the dark head and saw it jerk out of sight. Bullets whined and spattered all around him. He spaced three shots along the top of the bluff and raised spurts of dust. More heavy firing broke out below decks.

The defensive power from the boat was overwhelming, and it didn't take the Sioux long to diagnose their mistake. Their fire slackened and finally died. Somehow Matt felt a bit of disappointment. He had stood right out there in the open, but no bullets had even tagged at his clothes. Evidently the finger of fate was indicating that his duty lay further down the river.

"All hands out!" Monahan was roaring. "Clear the channel!" It was the loudest Matt had ever heard him.

He watched the French crew leap from the bow with axes and cant hooks. He marveled at the men's hardiness and agility as he watched them slip and climb over the submerged debris. One fell from his perch and was swished almost out of sight before he scrambled ashore; but he came back to his job on the run. In less than an hour the jam was broken up. Although the soldiers maintained a lookout, there was no further sign of the Sioux.

There was still a tingle left in Matt's blood. He hoped his shots had not found any of their marks, although he would not dare voice it. In a way, these red men were his brothers more than any of the wild things he had come to look upon as kin.

They made it from there to Yankton with only two groundings on sand bars. By now the waters of the Cheyenne, the White and the Niobrara had contributed their cadences from the hills and from the prairies, and Big Muddy was approaching the crest of its might.

At Yankton, Monahan leaned over the rail to watch cargo come aboard. He spat into the river and nodded toward the squalid town.

"Gateway to the Black Hills," he said. There was some bitterness in his voice,

and Matt knew why. It had made trouble for all of them.

By treaty, the Black Hills had been awarded to the Sioux . . . *for as long as grass shall grow: for as long as waters shall run.* That had been part of the wording. But that was before gold was uncovered in the hills. Now this sordid spot had become the jumping off place for thousands of the greedy. The treaty was being ignored. The Sioux were fighting back. The gold hungry were demanding military escort and the government was giving it.

Matt shared Monahan's disgust and feeling of shame.

BUT it was not until they floated out onto the comparative calm of the Mississippi that Matt realized how short his time was. They were less than an hour out of St. Louis, and Catherine Bixby's cool gray eyes seemed to be looking at him. Just the way they had looked at him three years ago, cool and gentle, but firm. He began to fret inwardly and pace the deck. He saw Monahan watching him, but the pilot kept silent.

Was it possible that his long-range courtship through Tim Mason had been more effective than a personal one? What if the answer was no again? Would he again be crushed and take refuge in flight? He doubted it, for he had found a new strength. But if he did, he would have no Captain Tim to rely on this time.

Although the day was cool, sweat trickled down his face and between his shoulder blades by the time they had warped into the waterfront at St. Louis. He stalled until all cargo and passengers were ashore before he shook hands with Ab Monahan. There seemed to be something behind the bleak eyes as the tall man spoke.

"I don't know what you're aiming to do. But if you want a room you can stay at the Sippy right over there. It's handy to the river."

Matt started to thank him but the lanky pilot moved away.

The Sippy proved to be more of a board-

[*Turn page*]

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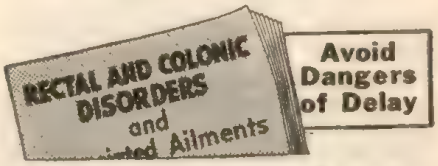

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ing house than a hotel, but it did command a good view of the waterfront. Matt stowed his war sack in the room assigned to him and ate dinner. Afterward he laid on the lumpy bed and tried to relax. He gave up after half an hour and went out to hire a rig.

For two hours he drove aimlessly around town. He stopped in front of Henri's where he and Catherine and Tim had celebrated, but the place depressed him. He drove on.

It didn't seem possible that the buildings had gotten so grimy in three years. He hadn't remembered that the streets were so filthy. The coal smoke irritated his nostrils. Finally he gave up and returned the rig to the livery stable. He had avoided Catherine's street.

Back at the Sippy he felt actually unclean. He took a sponge bath from the ornate china basin in his room. It was time for supper, but he had no appetite. He went to bed instead.

It was daylight when he awakened. For a while he didn't know where he was. Then he got up and went to the window. The waterfront was almost within throwing distance, and he saw the *Prairie Miss* riding easily at her moorings. She would be going upriver again at dawn tomorrow. There were other boats he knew strung out ahead and behind. But for him they were just names; she was something alive, something personal. He wondered where she would load wood for the final leg to Fort Benton.

Then he remembered his purpose. He had committed himself and he must follow through. He forced himself away from the window and began to dress. Remembering how people had stared at him yesterday, he told himself he would have to get a haircut and buy a new suit and hat. His buckskin jacket and cap were out of place, except along the waterfront and in the Quarters.

"A city man's got to look like one," he mused grimly.

It was nearly noon when he finished his tasks but he still had no stomach for food. Catherine Bixby's face was with him con-

stantly as he wandered through the busy streets. The uncertainty of what might come from those lips kept him tied up inside. Finally he faced it squarely.

"I can't backtrack now," he told himself.

He thought of all the missionary work that had been done for him by Captain Tim. He remembered some of the messages and letters he had written. Especially he remembered his last message. That was the one that needed definite answering. Somehow it didn't seem as urgent as it had when he was two thousand miles upriver. But it had to be followed through nevertheless.

He thought of renting another rig but decided against it. Catherine's house was not more than two miles west. He had covered many times that much over rough ground up in the Territory. Besides the walk would give him more time to think.

But the trip through the rows of brownstone houses did nothing to stimulate his thoughts or ease his spirits. The houses made him feel shut in; the sidewalks jarred unpleasantly under his boots.

WHEN he finally reached Catherine's house he walked past it several times before he worked up enough courage to go up to the door. His fingers felt like brittle twigs as he raised the knocker.

The woman who answered his summons wore a cross face. She opened the door only a trifle. Then when she had absorbed some of the look of him, she lost the cross look and opened the door wider. Matt could not remember having seen her before. Probably a new maid, maybe a boarder. He raised his hat, feeling awkward because he had not taken it off before.

"Is Miss Catherine at home?" he asked.

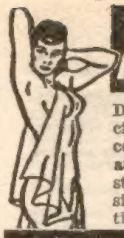
His voice seemed steady and polite enough but the woman frowned at him.

"Miss Catherine?" The woman's voice was unpleasant and grated on his ears.

"Yes, Miss Catherine Bixby."

Slowly the woman's face changed. Her mouth was still pulled down at the corners

[*Turn page*]



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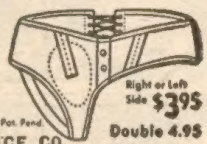

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but now she assumed the look of a professional mourner. She tilted her head downward but her eyes looked up at Matt.

"Didn't you know?" she asked.

Matt shook his head although the question obviously needed no answer.

"Her and her folks," the woman said. "They were took by the pox. They went just like that." She snapped her fingers. "Lots of folks had it but the Bixbys were sure took quick."

Matt took a couple of backward steps. The woman was looking at him straight on now.

"I thought everybody knowed about that by this time," she said. "Why let me see, that was two—no, that was nigh onto three years ago. Right after that river boat captain started calling on her. I lived across the street. I—"

But Matt had turned away and was going stiff-legged down the steps. Automatically he went toward the river. Tim's voice came to him dimly.

"A river man has his boat . . . no other woman. . . ."

Deep inside Matt had a murky, swirling feeling. He knew there were some snags hidden there, too. He would have to navigate those later. Right now he was kin to the Big Muddy in other ways. He wasn't exactly a riverman but he had his other love, too. He was feeling the beat of it, that new pulse that came from the mountains and the prairies. There was almost that same wildness as the Big Muddy's in him. He could surge out of his shackles and dig a new channel whenever he felt like it. He could go places with no one to answer to.

His legs felt like saplings on the upper Missouri in the spring. The brownstone houses no longer had the power to make him feel shut in. They were still there, but he was unconscious of them as he hurried past.

His long strides were carrying him to a new date with the *Prairie Miss.* ● ● ●

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